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George L. San Jose

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George L. San Jose has seen a lot of companies that were great at the 100-yard dash. However, he's not impressed by the flash-in-the-pans of the world and prefers to liken his company, The San Jose Group Co., to a well-conditioned marathoner. Fostering what he describes as a customer-centric culture, San Jose has stressed persistence and consistency since founding the Hispanic-focused marketing agency in 1981. Employing 54 people in Chicago and more than 700 worldwide, The San Jose Group now records more than \$130 million in domestic annual billings. *Smart Business* spoke with San Jose, the company's president and COO, about leading by example and seeking out fresh ideas.

Personify your vision and build buy-in. If you're expecting people to follow you and to follow your example, then you have to live your example. You have to be a living testament as to what they can achieve.

In a way, you almost have to be their mirror, so that they can see themselves in you and thus begin to think on their own that, 'Gee, if he did it, then I can do it.' It's like anything else. You have to see the end from the beginning. You have to know where you're going before you can figure out how to get there, and if you know what it looks like, you at least know when you've arrived.

My style is very much leading by example, casting out a vision. There are three major steps to it. First is casting out a vision, specifying the objectives, achieving the buy-in from everyone in the vision and making sure they understand it. It has to be made into a common vision for everyone to feel and touch.

Then you have to support that with incentives. There has to be a reward mechanism in place for those folks who are going to help you.

The last part is pulling the people to help you accomplish it. You lay all that out, and then you just have to pull them along.

Hire for potential. I've learned that the vision that I had can be accomplished and that the vision we set out has really made a difference in the type of agency that we have become, the size of our organization and the quality of our work. I've also learned that not every person wants to be pulled into a higher professional level than the one that they



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presently might have achieved.

Studies show that 20 percent of the people in an organization are going to resist change. Not everybody that you hire is going to be one that wants to achieve that higher level of excellence.

A lot of times in the hiring process, we try to evaluate candidates on not what they bring to the table right now, but as best as we can, is this a candidate that can be promoted two or three times higher than the level they're at right now? At the end of the day, I'm a coach.

It's kind of like a sports team. You have great players in different positions, and as a mentor to them, I look at people not based on what they can deliver but based on the full potential that they have.

It's impossible sometimes to know in a 30-minute interview or even if you screen them at two or three levels what the person's disposition is going to be. There are telltale signs that you can look at and read, but a lot of times it's just like the stock market. You look at where they've come from, and that's how you can judge where they're going. It's not necessarily true 100 percent of the time, but it does provide you a pretty good guide.

Constantly strive for excellence. Most employees would tend to do enough work just to get by. They'll do good work, but good is just not good enough.

To achieve excellence, it's something that you have to constantly work on. Excellence is in the details. To get people to see your vision and to capture the fact that if we do work at a higher level of excellence, we don't have to do as much.

We'll do less work, run more profitably and with less stress. That's a hard point to get across sometimes.

I can't repeat enough how important it is to be constant. It's constant training, constant evaluation, a constant pursuit of excellence and teaching by example. That's not only as to how you behave yourself but as to how you would tackle projects or assignments or basically points of view on how to manage a business better.

Seek out new ideas. Leaders tend to sometimes live in a vacuum. They run their own companies and they make statements to themselves that we're the best at this or we're the best at that, and a lot of times, those statements and that way of thinking are not founded or grounded in anything that is actual truth. They believe that, but they haven't exposed themselves to what their competitors are doing or what their colleagues might be thinking.

It's important for a leader to break away from the office at least two or three times a year and go to conferences where they can see other businesses and how they're addressing issues and other



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things that they're doing. I've found that has recharged my battery on a continual basis.

If you always think that the people you're competing against are smarter than you are, you're always going to try to be smarter than they are. That, in itself, will make you more competitive, but you have to constantly be on the lookout for what's hot and what's a new, innovative way of doing something. There's something that I constantly teach my folks here, and that is if it was great that way last week, what are we going to do differently to make it better this week?

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George L. San Jose, president & chief creative officer of The San Jose Group, a multicultural advertising agency.

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