

What Do You Call People With Visions? The Role of Vision, Mission and Goals in School Leadership and Improvement

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VISION, MISSION AND GOALS IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

In this section we begin the process of unpacking the conceptual foundations of these related terms. We assert that until scholars distinguish more clearly among these terms and their underlying assumptions, it will be difficult to craft appropriate strategies for either empirical study or practice.

The Role of Vision in School Improvement

What do you call people who have visions? a) insane, b) religious fanatics, c) poets, d) mystics, e) leaders. Depending on your frame of reference, one or all of the above would be correct. After decades of mistrust concerning notions of charismatic leadership, a new notion of visionary leadership crept into popularity during the 1980's and 1990's. This was often termed "transformational leadership" by proponents (e.g., Bass, 1985; Leithwood, 1994). This approach to leadership sought to describe and explain the manner by which organizational and political leaders appeared to profoundly influence their constituencies. Its application has spread beyond the political arena into business and schools. A central facet of transformational leadership is the notion of vision.

Vision as an avenue of influence in school improvement

Personal vision refers to the values that underlie a leader's view of the world, and in this case, education. The use of the word vision is not accidental. A vision

enables one to see facets of school life that may otherwise be unclear, raising their importance above others.

The foundation of vision is moral or spiritual in nature. For example, the use of vision in religious contexts suggests the notion of a sacred calling from within the individual. While secular education disavows formal religious practice in schools, education itself remains fundamentally a sacred craft in which we offer service to others. Education is a moral enterprise (Barth, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 1992a; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hallinger, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1992).

A vision, by its nature is a source of inspiration for one's life work. It is *not* by nature measurable or bound to a timeline. It draws its power as a well-spring of personal motivation that can act as a catalyst to action for oneself and potentially for others.

Roland Barth (1993), among the most articulate proponents of vision as an inspiration for educational leadership, claims that personal visions grow out of the values we hold most dearly. He suggests several questions that may clarify an educator's personal vision:

- In what kind of school would you wish to teach?
- What brought you into education in the first place?
- What are the elements of the school that you would want your own children to attend?
- What would the school environment in which you would most like to work look like, feel like, and sound like?
- If your school were threatened, what would be the last things that you would be willing to give up?
- On what issues would you make your last stand? (Barth, 1996, personal communication)

The power of a personal vision lies both in its impact on one's behavior and its potential to energize others. A clearly formed personal vision shapes our actions, invests our work with meaning, and reminds us why we are educators. When a personal vision is shared by others, it can become a catalyst for transformation (Barth, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 1992a, 1996; Hallinger, 1996).

Empirical study of vision

The inspirational facet of a personal vision received the most attention in the earlier leadership literature, especially in the context of charismatic leadership. More recent scholarship in educational leadership, however, has identified additional avenues through which vision may have an impact on schools. This has focused on the transformational model of school leadership (e.g., Leithwood,

1994; Leithwood et al., 1998; Silins, 1994). For example, research on administrative problem solving links personal vision to expertise in problem solving and decision-making (e.g., Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1990, 1992; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995).

Teachers and principals make thousands of decisions daily, often without the data needed to make informed choices. Leithwood and colleagues found that leaders with clearly articulated personal values are often more effective problem solvers. When tackling the messy problems often faced in schools, the *visionary* leader's values became "substitutes for information" (Leithwood et al., 1992). Clearly defined personal values allowed principals to identify important features hidden within swampy problem situations. This provides a sounder basis on which to formulate solutions. It also enabled the principals to take a more consistent approach to solving diverse problems by linking problem interpretation to core values.

Personal vision has also been identified as an important facet underlying organizational learning (Caldwell, 1998; Hallinger, 1998; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1998; Senge, 1990). Within the model of a learning organization, the capacity of a school to learn new ways of thinking and practicing is tied intimately to its capacity to envision a new future. As Leithwood and colleagues note, "This dimension [vision] encompasses practices on the part of the leader aimed at identifying new opportunities for his or her school and developing (often collaboratively), articulating and inspiring others with a vision of the future" (p. 80).

Vision becomes an especially important condition underlying organizational learning during times of rapid change (Drucker, 1995; Hallinger, 1998; Kotter, 1996; Senge, 1990). Those changes that most influence schools today originate in the environment (e.g., technology, migration trends, system and government policies). This suggests that in the future principals and other school leaders will need to focus at least as much attention outside the schoolhouse as inside. School leaders must be able to discern emerging trends in the environment and link these future possibilities with past traditions within their organizations.

This will become an increasingly necessary function of school leadership as the pace and scope of change quicken in the environment of schools. Moreover, if responsibility for school management continues to devolve to the schoolhouse, principals will need to take on even more CEO-like functions. Primary among these is visioning: looking ahead to the future and scanning the environment for change forces coming to schools from the outside (Bolman & Deal, 1992a, 1992b; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Hallinger, 1996, 1998; Leithwood, 1994).

Caldwell (1998) draws a similar linkage between the personal vision of a school leader, school learning, and school improvement. He refers to a variety of data – quantitative and qualitative – suggesting the importance of vision, though he emphasizes the need to use a small "v" in referring to the concept. To support this view, Caldwell references research conducted by Johnston (1997) on "learning focused leadership." In the context of her case study, Johnston described the role of vision.

The principal was clearly influential but, at the same time, was regarded as a team player. She was particularly adept at demonstrating what the current reality was while exposing the school to a vision of what could be. She articulated the creative tension gap and indicated the way forward. In the process the school was infused with an energy and optimism not often seen in schools at this time. The idea that all within the school should be leaders captures the notion of leadership of teams.... (Johnston, 1997, p. 282; cited in Caldwell, 1998, p. 374)

Caldwell (1998) also notes research conducted by Hill and colleagues (Hill & Rowe, 1996) that provides further support for vision as an important construct in understanding school improvement:

Hill contends that principals have a central, if indirect role by helping to create the 'pre-conditions' for improvement in classrooms, including setting direction, developing commitment, building capacity, monitoring progress and constructing appropriate strategic responses" (Hill, cited in Caldwell, 1998, p. 372).

Several other studies have also demonstrated the role of vision in school improvement. For example, Mayronwetz and Weinstein (1999) determined that vision was important in the successful adoption of change. They found that redundant leadership performance by individuals in different organizational roles demonstrated a widely-shared vision for successful change efforts. Moreover, Leithwood and colleagues (1998) determined that vision building affected school culture. More specifically, leadership helped to foster the acceptance of group goals. Kleine-Kracht (1993) also found that one successful means of principal influence on the staff was through building consensus surrounding the school's program and its goals for improvement.

A vision can also identify a path to a new future, a strategic dimension of leadership. A vision can assist a leader in becoming a more effective problem solver by helping to sort and find the most important problems. Finally, a vision can identify the critical paths for change and organizational learning. Although, this discussion has focused specifically on the vision of the school leader, it is readily apparent that vision connects quite directly to the second related construct, organizational mission.

Organizational Mission in School Improvement

An organizational mission exists when the personal visions of a critical mass of people cohere in a common sense of purpose within a community. Several characteristics of a mission are notable here. First, like "vision," the word "mission" derives from the religious sector and connotes a moral purpose or sacred quest. The spiritual element of a mission fulfills a human need for

meaning and purpose that transcends organizational types. It is the moral character of a mission that reaches into the hearts of people and engages them to act on behalf of something beyond their own immediate self-interest. The power of a mission lies in the motivational force of engaging in a *shared quest* to accomplish something special, not just in having a productivity target. In education, it is not uncommon for teachers to feel a “calling” to their work, again connoting a mission or moral challenge.

Mission as an avenue of influence in school improvement

In the general organizations literature, mission is sometimes referred to as *cathectic goals*. As suggested in the foregoing discussion of mission, cathectic goals are symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 1992a, 1992b, 1996). In theory mission serves as a source of identification and motivation for a group of participants (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Hallinger, 1996).

Cathectic goals stand in contrast to *cognitive goals*, which describe timelines and measurable ends that may be achieved. A mission is first and foremost a symbolic expression of the organization’s values (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Steiner, 1979). As a symbolic statement of purpose, the organization’s mission is generally articulated in an overarching fashion. By doing so leaders can encompass a relatively wide range of organizational interests and values (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 1992b, 1996; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Drucker, 1995; Kotter, 1996; Mintzberg, 1998; Perrow, 1968; Weick, 1976, 1982).

The theoretical basis for understanding the power of mission lies in human motivation (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 1996; Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Drucker, 1995; Handy, 1994). Organizational theorists posit the constructs of compliance and commitment as contrasting factors in human behavior (Mohr, 1973; Warriner, 1965). It is relatively easy for managers to force staff to comply with simple rules and regulations. However, in the absence of sustained pressure, individual and group behavior often reverts to its previous state or displaces the defined goal in favor of alternative goals (Grusky, 1959; Fullan 1993; Lindblom, 1959; March & Olsen, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Perrow, 1968; Raia, 1965; Ridgeway, 1956; Warriner, 1965; Weick, 1976, 1982).

Achieving commitment to group goals, while more difficult, is generally viewed as a key factor in organizational effectiveness (Cuban, 1984a, 1984b; Drucker, 1995; Mohr, 1973; Kotter, 1996; Perrow, 1968; Senge, 1990; Steiner, 1979; Warriner, 1965; Weick, 1976, 1982). Where a mission exists, staff will take greater responsibility for managing their own behavior and making decisions consistent with common norms (Given, 1994; Jacobsson & Pousette, 2001; Jantzi & Leithwood, 1993; Larson-Knight, 2000; Leithwood et al., 1998; Senge, 1990; Silins, Mulford, Zarins, & Bishop, 2000).

This type of commitment to a shared vision of education has been a hallmark of the school effectiveness and improvement literature of the past two decades.

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