The Elements of Successful Leadership

Vision: Is What You See What You Get?

Vision is the essence of leadership, essential for organizational effectiveness and success, used as a major leadership tool in enlisting its members towards the defined objective, and focused on the constructive role of the organization within its environment. A study by Dr. Ronit Bogler of the Department of Education and Psychology of the Open University of Israel and Dr. Adam E. Nir of the School of Education at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, published in the Journal of Leadership Studies, examines the dynamics of that leadership. It looks at the three critical components involved in making that vision work: the leader (the head of the organization), the members of the organization (staff) and the environment in which they function (the community), to determine how their orientation and interaction contribute to the implementation of the vision, the realization of objectives and the success of the organization.

Vision, the lofty ideal and sought-after dream, the key to success that it is, is no simple matter to define. One point of view holds that the magnitude of the discrepancy between the future goal and the present circumstances is the yardstick for how exceptional and extraordinary the vision is. The authors of this paper contend that too wide a discrepancy between the vision and the reality might yield a counter-productive mission statement for the organization. The more prevalent and practical view is that the vision must be based on reality, while striving for a better future. If a leader is to elicit enthusiasm and draw his followers after him, then, as G. Yukl defines it, “the genius of the leader is to articulate a vision simple enough to be understood, appealing enough to evoke commitment and credible enough to be accepted as realistic and attainable.”

The Qualities of Vision

Vision is the organization’s mission statement, its primary values, reflecting the expectations and interests of the leader as well as the followers, and articulating “a common caring” of the organization’s members. The leader must ascertain that the members are familiar with the vision and are motivated to contribute to the general good of the organization. It is the role of the leader to conceive and articulate this vision, embodying the goals of the organization, and to be aware of the needs and expectations of the people involved and the environment around him. To enhance the organization’s effectiveness, the leader has to believe in this vision and its feasibility and to tailor the vision to the attributes of the organization’s members and the environment.

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The researchers delineate four types of leadership orientations. The leader may be “detached,” in which case the leader may define a mission statement that is detached from the realities of his followers and the community, rendering the vision irrelevant and ineffective. The leader may be inward-oriented and biased toward attending to the interests of his followers, developing a relationship so close to his operational staff that it precludes taking the necessary decisions to develop his vision in accordance with the interests of the community. The leader may be outward-oriented, and be so attentive to community demands that he cannot accomplish his vision given his intra-organizational circumstances and demands.

The researchers provide examples from the educational system. A school principal who is inward-oriented may wish to respond to the interest of the community in incorporating new technologies and instruction methods, but may be excessively influenced by the resistance of teachers and lag behind in the necessary development. A principal who is outward-oriented may attempt to implement projects that were successful in other schools, but does not take into account the limitations of school staff qualifications or motivation. The “attentive” leader takes into consideration the characteristics of...
both the followers and the environment and implements his vision in harmony with the relevant essentials.

An organization whose leader misjudges or ignores any or all of the three essentials of leadership may fail to fulfill its mission effectively. Naturally, the vision defined by the leader would have to correspond to his own set of characteristics, style, capabilities, competence, intelligence and scope of knowledge in the tasks to be performed.

Staff Traits
The leader may find he is limited by the character traits of his staff. Important factors in enlisting their cooperation may be the level of their psychological maturity, their ability and willingness to confront obstacles and complexities; their job maturity, the ability or competence to perform any kind of professional activity demanded by the job; the level of motivation; and their ability to cope with multiple goals, deal with long-term commitment and face abstract and ambiguous missions.

The Environment
The environment may be homogeneous and easier to cope with, or may be heterogeneous, ranging from dynamic, to diverse, to turbulent. In a turbulent, unstable environment, with a high rate of change, the ability of the leader to set multiple goals and long-range missions is constrained. Under turbulent circumstances, mission statements should delineate exactly what is to be done, how and when.

Dynamic Vision in Changing Environments
Leadership and vision are dynamic and require ongoing harmony. One school principal says:
“You talk about vision. I came to this school with a vision of a school with the highest standards of conduct, academic attainment and sporting achievement. I drew a staff around me who believed in that vision as much as I did and within a few years we had made that dream a reality. The vision was communicated to the town through our performance. We were respected, appreciated and understood by the whole community.”

“When in the early 70s they began to make us a comprehensive school I tried to create a vision of the new school, but I couldn’t. It did not fit either with my beliefs or with those of my longstanding colleagues. We went through the motions of organization and rhetoric but what developed was a shadow of the former school... My retirement was a happy release. My successor believed wholeheartedly in such schools and except for a few departures convinced the staff of its value and purpose.”

The Key to Achievement: Reality-Based, Dynamic, Harmonious Vision
Warns Dr. Bogler, “It may cause more harm than good when an articulated vision, detached from reality, becomes an illusion, fashioned to fit an idealized image of a non-existent entity, thus losing its potential to serve as a guiding and leading force for those associated with the mission. Impossible missions can result in indifference and lack of motivation, whereas step-by-step successes bolster the motivation for further successes. A competent principal who has the capability to articulate a vision that incorporates every sector’s concern is someone who will most likely gain the appreciation of members both within and outside of the organization. The articulation and on-going refinement of a relevant and agreed-upon vision is critical to the effective operation of the organization – and is essential for today’s modern, dynamic school systems.”

Pied Piper leadership by Yirmi Leza