



NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1997

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If You Can Envision It, You Can Create It

By Joan Richardson

Close your eyes for just a moment. Now, imagine how you'll look after you're dressed for work tomorrow morning.

Will you be wearing baggy, torn blue jeans and a too-big, dull colored T-shirt? Or, will you wear that navy blue gabardine suit with a crisp, freshly ironed linen shirt or blouse?

Will you have the spit 'n' polish look of a military officer? Or the laid-back attitude of a just-out-of-college newcomer?

How you see yourself tomorrow morning is your vision. Your mission consists of the steps you take to achieve that vision.

Just as individuals need to envision who they want to be before they can create it, schools, too, need a vision. As the saying goes, you must be able to imagine it before you can create it.

Leadership expert Stephen Covey puts it another way: Begin with the end in mind.

But no vision can guide the work of an orga-

nization unless it is shared by the organization's key stakeholders. If, for example, a principal has a powerful vision but cannot create a shared vision with parents and teachers, then it will be a failed vision.

Many educators know that sharing the vision begins by including many voices in creating the vision.

West Oak High School in Westminster, South Carolina, began identifying its vision when 40 parents, teachers, students, and community members attended a week-long strategic planning retreat at a nearby lake. "We got out of our space and we could focus without interruption," said principal Sam Bass.

That week gave West Oak's leaders time to explore the school's strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, they found time to dream about what their school might become.

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Vision

COVER STORY

**THE VISION-
MISSION PROCESS**

- **Identify the stakeholders** that should be represented.
- **Gather** the representatives together for an initial meeting.
- **If your school or district** already has a vision or mission statement, begin by looking at that. If you're starting from scratch, talk out your dreams for your school. Sketch out on a chalkboard some broad themes and begin to focus the themes.
- **At this point**, you have one of two options. First, you can draft vision and mission statements and take them to the different stakeholders. Your other option is to have the representatives of these groups lead similar discussions in the groups they represent.
- **Re-assemble the core group** and, once again, re-draft the vision-mission statements with the community sentiments in mind.
- **Make a second visit** to the stakeholders.
- **Finalize the statements** and develop a plan for publicizing them, ensuring that all staff members understand and know how the statements should direct their work.
- **Develop a plan** for publicizing the statements in the community.

Visit the Library at www.nsd.org for links to more information about vision and mission statements.

You can create a shared vision

Continued from Page One

"When you involve the community in this, it makes a statement to the community that you value their input. We listened to them, and they could see that we had listened. They could see that their ideas and their discussion was accepted. As a result of that, they felt ownership," Bass said.

The vision and resulting mission are discussed at length during the first faculty meeting each year. West Oak's vision and mission are displayed in classrooms and printed in the student handbook as well.

THE DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Sometimes, the vision setting process begins at the top. Often, nobody even uses the word "vision" to describe what's going on.

Oak Park, Michigan, is a case in point. The struggling district embarked on a districtwide school improvement effort by gathering together about a hundred residents to talk about their definition of success. (See the September 1997 issue of *Results* for more about Oak Park's change efforts.)

After a sometimes heated two-day meeting facilitated by the district's business partner, the community had agreed on its definition of success. "We had taken people through the process of creating that vision. It's engaging people in that conversation that's important," said Gary Marx, director of school performance analysis.

Marx also believes this sort of process helps insulate schools from the ebb and flow of politics. Because the community agreed on what it wants, the community is less likely to be influenced by a single vocal new school board member or local resident.

"After five years, I'm working on the same goals, but not a single member of the board of education is the same," Marx said.

Often, schools need just a nudge from central office to propel them into the self-examination that is part of the vision/mission process. In Memphis, Tennessee, that nudge came when Supt. Gerry House in-

troduced school improvement planning five years ago.

For 20 years, Idlewild Elementary School in midtown Memphis had boasted that it offered individually-guided education. But when stakeholders came together in 1994, they quickly agreed that wasn't really the case and that it wasn't really what they wanted. "It was a magnet school that really didn't have a focus," said principal Ric Potts.

But Idlewild's staff, community, and parents soon identified the focus they wanted: science and technology, thematic teaching, alternative assessments, and site-based management.

For most of the next year, the stakeholders refined their ideas into succinct statements and identified yearly goals. "Every decision we make is based on our goals," Potts said.

FITS LIKE A GLOVE

For Idlewild, the benefit of the vision/mission process became obvious in 1995. That's when Supt. House invited each of Memphis' 162 schools to preview school design models from the New American Schools, an innovative national school improvement project.

"When we looked at those, there was no question that the Co-NECT model fit our vision like a glove. It had every component that was part of our vision," Potts said.

Today, Idlewild is one of 74 Memphis schools using a New American Schools design. As the school has sharpened its focus, Potts said student achievement has started to rise and parents have shown more interest in enrolling their children in the school.

"I wholeheartedly embrace this. Everything we do in our school comes from our school improvement plan and everything in the plan comes from the vision. Going through this truly takes off the dark glasses so you can see where you're heading," Potts said. □

Stretching To Create a Vision

Comments to the facilitator: This activity highlights the importance of visions that can stretch and challenge us. It helps us realize that we can usually do a lot more than we think we can.

Time: 10 minutes

Supplies: None

Person Responsible: Leader/facilitator

DIRECTIONS

1. Ask participants to stand, face the front of the room with their feet slightly apart.
2. Ask participants to turn as far to the left as possible, without moving their feet. Ask them to select a spot in the room that marks the farthest point they can see.
3. Ask participants to turn to the front of the room again.
4. Ask participants to turn to the left again to find the spot they identified in Step #2. They should not move their feet in order to do this.
5. Ask participants to select another spot a little beyond the spot selected in Step #2 and focus on that spot.
6. Ask participants to turn to the front again and find the spot selected in Step #5.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What happened? Were you able to find the new spot?
2. How does this activity relate to developing a vision?
3. What implications are there for schools and staffs as they start the visioning process?

A vision is a descriptive statement of what the school or district will be like at a specified time in the future. It uses descriptive words or phrases and sometimes pictures to illustrate what one would expect to see, hear, and experience in the school at that time. It may make references to the students, facility, curriculum, instruction, assessment, staff, and community.

— Stephanie Hirsh

Clarifying the Vision

Comments to facilitators: Some participants will find the star very easily. Others will not. Some will have difficulty even when the star is outlined.

According to Roger von Oech who designed this exercise, the point of this is that you must have some idea of what you're looking for in order to find it. Among the questions von Oech poses are these: "Did you define what you were looking for? Is it a five-pointed star? A Star of David? A seven-pointed sheriff's star? Is it a big star? A little star? Is it composed of both black and white triangles?"

Vision is the capacity to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in an organization.

– Thomas Sergiovanni

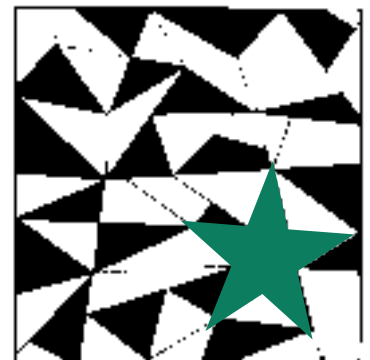
The discussion should revolve around the importance of vision and of a clearly stated vision, the necessity of ensuring that everyone understands and can easily define the vision. This should lead into additional work on creating a shared vision.

Source: Roger von Oech, *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1986), \$16. Order the book through your local bookstore. To contact von Oech for permission to use the illustration and exercise, phone (415) 321-6775 or fax (415) 321-0609.

DIRECTIONS

1. Create a transparency of "Find the Perfect Star" on Page 5.
2. Show the transparency, "Find the Perfect Star." Ask participants to locate and outline the five-pointed star. Allow about two minutes. (*See solution below.*)
3. If the group cannot locate the star, block half the transparency to narrow the field of vision. Allow one minute.
4. If most participants still cannot find the star, block and show the quadrant with the star and ask one of the participants to outline it.
5. Ask: "What does this activity have to do with building a vision?" "What happens if a vision is not shared?" "What are the implications for school teams?"
6. Have participants work in pairs to discuss the questions.
7. Invite pairs to share their reactions.
8. Summarize comments.

PUZZLE SOLUTION



Finding the Perfect Vision

**Find the perfect star in the pattern below.
As you look for it, be aware of your search strategies.**



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Four Corners to a Vision

Comments to the facilitator: This activity aims at getting underneath what participants say about learning. This is not a consensus-building activity. Instead, this activity provides a provocative way to get participants to think about their strongly-held beliefs, articulate those beliefs, and discuss them.

Time: 1 hour

Supplies: Newsprint, easel, masking tape, and lightweight board for making signs that indicate level of agreement.

Preparation: The key to designing this activity is to develop statements that focus on one topic or set of issues that is provocative enough to force participants to take a stand. It should also be as ambiguous as possible, allowing for different interpretations.

*Vision isn't forecasting
the future. It is creating
the future by taking
action in the present.*

– James Collins
& Jerry Porras

Examples of statements are:

- Standardized tests have no redeeming value.
- Students should never be placed in homogeneous groups.
- Teachers do not have the training or knowledge to use authentic assessment methods.
- All students are capable of assessing their work.
- Different assessment methods should be used with different students.
- All children can learn at high levels.

DIRECTIONS

1. Write the statement on a piece of newsprint. Then hang it in front of the room with the paper folded up so the statement cannot be seen until you are ready to begin.
2. Set up the room with signs in each of the four corners as follows: Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.
3. Show the statement to the group. Ask everyone to stand in the corner that represents how they feel about the statement. Instruct them to base their choice on their interpretation of what the statement means.
4. Ask those in each corner to talk among themselves about how they feel.
5. Next, have a spokesperson for each corner report to the whole group the different reasons why everyone in their group chose that corner. At any time during the process (even during the report out), participants may change their minds and move to a different corner.

Source: *Building Systems for Professional Growth: An Action Guide* by Margaret Arbuckle and Lynn B. Murray. (The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands and the Maine Dept. of Educational and Cultural Services, 1989), \$110. Order from Learning Innovations, 91 Montvale Ave., Stoneham, Mass. 02180, or phone (617) 279-8210.

Learning More About Vision

- **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook**, by Peter Senge, et. al. New York: Doubleday, 1994. A practical guide to implementing Senge's ideas about building a learning organization, including developing a shared vision. Check your local bookstore or library for a copy.
- **Creating New Visions for Schools**, by Learning Innovations (formerly the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands). Contains tools that can be used to aid the vision discovery process. Stock # 9413. Price: \$10. Order from Learning Innovations, 91 Montvale Ave., Stoneham, Mass. 02180 or phone (617) 279-8200.
- **Creating Visions and Standards to Support Them**, by Education Commission of the States. Handy guide to explain meaning and purpose of vision and its relationship to standards. Stock # SI-92-3. Price: \$4. Order from ECS Distribution Center, 707 17th St., Suite 2700, Denver, Colo. 80202-3427 or phone (303) 299-3692.
- **Strategic Planning and Action Planning for Nonprofit Organizations**, by John M. Bryson. *Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management* by Robert D. Herman. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994. Bryson's chapter offers overview of strategic planning for nonprofits, including schools. ISBN 1555-42-6514. Price: \$59.95. Phone: (415) 433-1740.
- **In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies**, by Tom Peters and R. H. Waterman Jr. New York: Harper Collins, 1982. One

of the early books that explored the connection between vision, planning, and successful organizations. Check your local bookstore or library for a copy.

- **Leadership for Tomorrow's Schools**, by Jerry Patterson. Alexandria, Va.: Assn. for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Patterson, former superintendent of schools in Appleton, Wisc., writes a handbook to lead school districts through a change process. Numerous tools provided. ASCD stock #611-93121. Price: \$11.95. Phone (703) 549-9110 or fax (703) 549-3891.

RESOURCES

- **"Making Impossible Dreams Come True,"** by James Collins and Jerry Porras, *Stanford Business School Magazine*, July 1989. Easy-to-read article describes the differences between visions and missions. Good introductory article for individuals new to the process. Check your local public library for a copy.
- **Restructuring Our Schools: A Primer on Systemic Change**, by W. Patrick Dolan. Kansas City, Mo.: Systems & Organization, 1994. Dolan, a consultant to numerous Fortune 500 companies on labor-management issues, has lately devoted more of his time to school restructuring efforts. Describes how to discover the shared beliefs of all parties. ISBN 0-964-1690-0-2. Price: \$19.95. Phone (913) 385-5225.

If you have a resource that has been particularly helpful to you as you develop your vision, please contact Tools editor Joan Richardson. See staff box for contact information.

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TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS STAFF

Editor: Joan Richardson
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Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Mission Statements Can Empower and Inspire

Q **Dear Dr. Developer,**
Everywhere I turn, people are talking about mission and vision statements. Frankly, I think all these statements end up sounding pretty much the same. So, why go through more meetings when everyone just comes up with the same slogans?

Frustrated in Fremont

A I have to agree with you that many of the vision and mission statements do sound the same. Lots of them use some variation on the theme “every child can learn.” I can understand how someone might wonder how valuable these statements really are.

On the positive side, mission statements that sound similar could indicate that educators and communities everywhere have some common understanding of what schools should be about. I believe there’s value in having lots and lots of people “on the same page” when it comes to the goals for schools.

Going through the process to arrive at these slogans, as you call them, is im-

portant in itself. You could pluck a mission or vision statement out of a book. But, then, educators in your building and the residents in your community wouldn’t have much connection to it.

Read the lead article in this issue and you’ll find examples of communities that have included hundreds of residents in creating these statements. Can you imagine the power they’ve experienced? Imagine how much easier it would be to create the schools we want—and need—if all the stakeholders had a real voice in shaping the vision for their schools.

Good mission and vision statements also can inspire individuals to help stretch schools to do more than they previously thought possible. Powerful mission statements contain a school’s loftiest aspirations for students and promote the deep change needed to reach worthy goals. Well-written mission and vision statements provide the focus that inspires schools to promote high levels of learning for all of their students and staff members.

Send your questions to Dr. Developer, 1128 Nottingham Rd., Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230.

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