LEADERSHIP BRIEFING

Organizational Vision in Inter-disciplinary and Intercultural Health Settings

by Valerie Barker

The Logic of Vision

Many professionals in healthcare settings are trained to be individual experts and independent decision-makers who nevertheless find themselves taking the role of leaders in multi-disciplinary, inter-organizational or intercultural environments. It is critical for such leaders to effectively prepare themselves and their organizations for fast paced change in line with current and expected technological, global, and economic shifts.

Effective leaders must develop the capacity to transform their organizations by communicating a shared vision informed by past and present, but targeted toward the future. In the realm of human services, everyday challenges and demands make it all too easy to operate in the short-term; however, healthcare professionals "must have the vision to take risks and help move their agencies into new ways of thinking and serving that respond to the changes taking place around them" (Garner, 1989, p.12)

What is Vision?

A vision is not a dream. It is a carefully formulated idea for the future -- a reality yet to materialize (Snyder & Graves, 1994). The presence of organizational vision helps the leader move things along in the right direction in spite of practical difficulties, budget restrictions, and internal or external opposition. When skillfully communicated, vision represents a force that inspires and binds all stakeholders, as well as empowering employees to move toward a goal.

Developing Scenarios

- ❏ Identify focal issue or decision
- ❏ Identify key factors in local environment
- ❏ Identify driving forces in environment
- ❏ Rank key factors and driving forces
- ❏ Select scenario logics
- ❏ Flesh out scenarios
- ❏ Assess implications

Adapted from The Long View, Peter Schwartz, 1991

Developing a Vision

According to Nanus (1992), in developing a vision, the leader acts as a direction-setter, change agent, communicator and mentor. These roles require optimism and flexibility -- the ability to constantly review and remodel the vision in response to changes in organizational environment. To begin, leaders must assess their organization's strengths and weaknesses, and determine its current direction. A systems approach to organizational analysis allows surveillance and understanding of the inter-relationships within the organization and the macro-environment in which it operates. The interests of individuals and groups with a stake in the organization must be defined to develop estimates of how future events may impact them. Most importantly, creating alternative visions or scenarios encapsulating the future's opportunities and threats will determine the most desirable and realistic direction for the organization to take.

Checklist for Creating a Vision

- ❏ Outline the current organizational mission.
- ❏ Define the operational framework of the organization
- ❏ Assess organizational strengths vs. weaknesses
- ❏ Define all organizational stakeholder interests

An Example?

Bezold, Mayer, and Dighe (1997) used detailed healthcare scenarios to predict four possible alternatives for the future of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provision of health care. They considered scenarios where the VA did and did not exist in the 21st century, and how they impacted the provision of healthcare to veterans, particularly poor, homeless veterans and veterans with substance abuse problems.

These scenarios forced administrators to stretch their thinking and test previously held assumptions. They allowed for an examination of a range of alternatives instead of just preparing for what they considered the most likely option. It led to their shared vision now in the process of being realized.

Shared Vision of VA

- **Redistribution of VA healthcare resources to more effectively meet veterans' needs**
- **Changes in avenues of access to healthcare**
- **Decentralization of decision-making and operations**
- **Development of a customer-centered culture**
- **Provision of cost-effective, quality care**

Vision Implementation

An organizational vision, as an evolutionary process, can be discussed and perfected by all those who see benefit in it, but then there must be action. Nanus (1997) suggests ten effective ways to facilitate implementation of an organizational vision. By making the vision a focus of meetings or retreats and by capturing attention of stakeholders in creative ways, a base of support can be built. The vision communicated clearly, simply and in a coherent way demonstrates the relevance of the vision to all those affected by it (Garner, 1989). When the potential benefits are made plain to concerned individuals, organizations and constituencies, this encourages participation. Leaders should "walk the talk," provide information to reduce uncertainty, and empower constituents by encouraging input. These steps

engender a strategy process from which spring actions necessary to realize the vision.

Steps for implementation

❑ Grab attention

❑ Communicate the vision

❑ Illustrate the benefits

❑ Encourage participation

❑ Walk your talk

❑ Provide information

❑ Listen to input

❑ Reward participants

❑ Empower constituencies

❑ Track acceptance and commitment

Adapted from Leading the Way to Renewal Burt Nanus, 1997.

Communicating Vision in Intercultural Settings

Culture is the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviors.

Figuring Foreigners Out, Craig Storti, 1999, p.5.

How does an organization in an intercultural or interdisciplinary setting harness heterogeneity to form a "well organized and harmonious matrix working together toward a common goal" (Snyder & Graves, 1994)? No individual prescription fits every organization. However, many of the leadership attributes identified as visionary and steps toward vision implementation apply particularly well in diverse environments. Flexibility, the abilities to listen, learn and utilize a variety of communication strategies are crucial.

Seven Lessons in Intercultural communication

1. **Don't assume sameness**
2. **What you consider to be "normal" may only be so in your culture**
3. **Familiar expressions or behaviors may have different meanings**
4. **Don't assume that your meaning has been understood**
5. **Don't assume that what you understood was meant**
6. **You don't have to like different forms of communication but you do need to understand them**
7. **Most people behave rationally; you just have to know the rationale**

Adapted from Cross-Cultural Diaglogues: 74 Brief Encounters with Cultural Difference, Craig Storti, 1994.

Knowing all the organizational constituencies and understanding the way they operate becomes essential. In forming alliances, each partner must understand the other's goals. Leaders need to know how diversity affects the relationship between superiors and subordinates in areas such as:

- problem solving
- giving feedback
- delegation of responsibility
- decision-making
- motivation of employees and constituencies

With regard to vision, leaders may be focused on their ultimate goal, but how they accomplish it can and should be infinitely variable (Smith & Peterson, 1988). Culture, whether national or organizational, provides a challenge to a visionary leader. Storti (1994) argues that organizational culture "is real enough, but against national culture - in terms of impact on behavior - it comes in a distant second" (p.89). There are many valuable sources of intercultural training (c.f., annotated bibliography and references). The important thing in relation to achieving vision is to be aware of them. Encouraging cultural awareness means that behavior which appears to makes no sense, causes frustration, or even offense can be understood as logical and perfectly acceptable to someone of a different culture. For example, the concept of time is treated differently in non-Western cultures. Reardon and Spekman (1994) suggest that "American negotiators usually operate as if today is the last day of their lives" (p.72). However, in other parts of the world much time is taken to reach consensus on

matters affecting stakeholders. Thus, in terms of outcome, what appears to be a waste of precious time to US professionals is regarded as time well spent by members of other cultures.

Understanding the way people (of any culture) "tick" leads to the development of appropriate strategies to achieve long term goals. People from the U.S. value individualism, laying the greatest stress on the autonomy of the individual -- directness, getting things done, achieving success (Hofstede, 1980). In other parts of the world (e.g. Japan, South America), a person's identity resides within the collective group or organization (collectivistic). Issues of politeness, saving face, and developing relationships over-ride individual concerns. This approach does not deny competitiveness, but emphasizes it as a group phenomenon. Similarly, while many organizations in U.S. possess flat hierarchies with little power distance between leaders and subordinates, individuals from collectivistic societies are accustomed to showing great deference to their superiors, and may exhibit initial reluctance to working independently, or taking risks. Every leader should be aware of these issues when considering strategies for vision implementation. Such strategies must be culturally grounded in order to succeed for as Trompenaars (1994) aptly observes, culture may act as a process "biting at the roots of centrally developed methods which do not fit locally" (p. 6).

Communication Strategies

Avoid the "one size fits all" approach

- To communicate the vision be aware of and tap into communication networks - informal, formal, political, cultural

- Develop communication competence -- knowledge, performance and impression

- Develop varied communication strategies based on organizational environment, situation, culture

For detailed discussion see Leadership: Communication Skills for Organizations and Groups, Kevin Barge, 1994.

The Importance of Communication

Every step involved in the development, implementation, and sharing of an organizational vision involves communication. Introducing and reinforcing

vision requires a simple, clear and credible message delivered orally and in writing. Visionary leaders must be competent communicators --demonstrating knowledge, managing impressions, performing well in public speaking, and showing sensitivity to intercultural communication strategies. Finally, communication, like vision, is a shared experience involving listening as much as responding, a learning process as much as an information-giving exercise.

Annotated Bibliography

Books

Barge, J. K. (1994). Leadership : Communication skills for organizations and groups. New York: St. Martin's Press.

The book provides a comprehensive survey of leadership theory and practice in organizations. It offers practical guidance for leaders interested in the development of communication strategies. Much helpful information is summarized in tabular form for quick review.

Gallois, C, & Callan, V. (1997). Comunication and culture: A guide for pracice. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

The book is a practical guide providing help for professionals who need to develop their knowledge and skills in communicating with people of different cultures. It is a highly accessible book that nevertheless offers a comprehensive review of theory, research and conceptual tools easily related to everyday intercultural situations.

Nanus, B. (1992). Visionary leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This is a classic treatise on how to formulate alternative visions and choose the best one for an organization and its stakeholders, to turn vision into action, and track its progress. Of particular interest to human service providers is the Appendix -- Visionary Leadership for the Public Sector.

Storti, C. (1999). Figuring foreigners out: A practical guide. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc.

A self-instructional cross-cultural training manual, this small book contains concepts at the heart of intercultural communication. It includes step-by-step exercises illustrating individualism /collectivism, verbal/nonverbal communication styles, and power distance and more. Storti is a Peace Corp veteran and trainer who brings a wealth of experience to the area of intercultural communication.

Articles

Nanus, B. (1997). Leading the vision team. Futurist, 30(3), 20-23.

Nanus updates his approach to visionary leadership and adds to his suggestion that leaders should never develop the organizational vision alone by describing the logic of the vision team and how it is best constructed and nurtured.

Bridging the leadership gap in healthcare. Healthcare Forum, 35(3), 49-64.

A national study of healthcare leaders revealed that they acknowledge a significant gap between present practices and the transformational competencies necessary for the future --mastering change; systems thinking; shared vision; continuous quality improvement; redefining healthcare; and serving the public-community.

Martinelli, F. (1998). Encouraging visionary board leadership. Nonprofit World, 16(4), 11-14.

Characteristics of visionary board leaders are discussed plus strategies future leadership including vision development. Interestingly, the barriers to visionary board leadership are also highlighted -- including fear of risk, micro-management, and lack of knowledge of a complex world. This is a quick, useful guide to important leadership issues.

Websites

http://www.cfhl.org/ Center For Health Leadership

Information and publications.

http://www.mapnp.org/library/org_thry/culture/culture.htm

Discussion paper and library links on organizational culture. Used in part by The Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits

http://www.opc.on.ca/pubs/hlth_chng/hlth_chng.html

Michels, K. (1996). Creating a capacity for change in health promotion and the non-profit sector. A discussion paper on healthy organizational change. Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse.

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Garner, L. H., Jr. (1989). Leadership in human services. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hofstede, G. H. (1980). Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Nanus, B. (1992). Visionary leadership: How to re-vision the future. Futurist, 26(5), 20-25.

Nanus, B. (1997). Leading the way to renewal. Executive Excellence, 14(1), 17-20.

Reardon, K. K., & Spekman, R. E. (1994). Starting out right: Negotiation lessons for domestic and cross-cultural business alliances. Business Horizons, 37(1), 71-79.

Smith, P. B., & Peterson, M. F. (1988). Leadership, organizations and culture. London: Sage.

Snyder, N. H., & Graves, M. (1994). Leadership and vision. Business Horizons, 37(1), 1-7.

Storti, C. (1994). Cross-cultural dialogues: 74 brief encounters with cultural differences. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc.

Trompenaars, F. (1994). Riding the waves of culture: Understanding diversity in global business. Chicago, Ill: Irwin Professional Publishing.