

INSIGHTS INTO *Action*



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Turning Vision Into Reality

The number-one determinant of a school's success is the leader. I have to be throughout the school. When people are on the school grounds, they have got to see and feel my leadership in the lobby, to feel me, throughout the halls.

—*Baruti Kafele*

Action Items

- * **Make morning announcements**
- * **Send a daily e-mail to staff**
- * **Attend community events**
- * **Conduct effective meetings**

A Living Vision

“Good morning, good morning, good morning,” the booming voice intones as students step off the bus and onto the school grounds. Principal Baruti Kafele extends his hand to and makes eye contact with every student as he or she enters the building—*his* building. Minutes later, over the public announcement system, he urges students to “have your best day yet while maintaining a positive attitude.” Not content to sit behind his desk and push papers, Kafele stresses the importance of articulating a vision and then modeling that vision each day—during each classroom visit, each conversation with a staff member, and each discussion with a parent.

Principal Kafele embodies what researchers call *change leadership*. He began his career in education as a substitute teacher in Brooklyn. Just completing his fourth principalship, Kafele is known for taking the reins of a school in crisis and transforming the entire school community. He served for the last five years at Newark Tech High School in Newark, New Jersey, a school where more than 85 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—and one that boasts a graduation rate of over 95 percent. Named a 2009 Milken National Educator, Kafele is author of the best-selling book *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life* and speaks to audiences across the United States. He credits his schools’ successes to his *vision* and his *visibility*.

The Importance of Vision

In interviewing Principal Kafele, I quickly realized that he believes the school leader is *the* essential component in realizing a meaningful vision. He is not shy about noting the critical factor to transformative change in an education system: “It’s me,” he says bluntly. “I don’t care what the circumstances of the students are—where they are from, their home life. We have to see success in them, we have to envision excellence in them. That drives everything I say, everything I think, everything I do as a leader. . . . The number-one determinant of a school’s success is the leader.”

Researcher Judith Kafka (2009) agrees, noting that “a growing body of literature suggests that there is a discernible relationship between school leaders’ actions and student achievement” (p. 318). Goldring and Schuermann (2009) take it further, asserting that “today’s educational leaders need to motivate community-mindedness to address communitywide problems that are central to schools and the current imperatives of student achievement” (p. 16).

Kafele stresses, however, that school success cannot rest on one leader’s personality. As he explains, “My focus is having the students develop a vision for themselves and transforming their attitudes, taking ownership of the vision. The rest—the test scores and achievement gaps—will take care of themselves.”

Forming, articulating, and living such a vision is crucial to sustained leadership in a school. Schools and other organizations spend an abundance of time on developing their visions, often bringing in outside consultants to help. A school’s vision should be more than empty words plastered on a marquee sign; it must have rich, relevant meaning. It is up to the leader to embody this vision every day. Each and every interaction serves as an opportunity to highlight where the school is headed.

When I became an elementary school principal in 2006, I wrote a letter to the community introducing myself and inviting parents to come in over the summer months to meet and chat. Little did I know how busy those “slow” summer months would be. Questions abounded about “the new guy,” and I’ll never forget the first parent who came into my office. I tried to make small talk and ask about her summer, but she got right to the point. “Dr. Sterrett,” she said, looking me straight in the eyes, “what is your vision for the school?” I paused. I recognized the importance of the question and knew that the answer wasn’t something I could just whip up or pull from a book. My response had to be sincere and relevant, and it had to speak to her child’s success. My mind raced, and I searched for something profound to say. Eventually, I came up with “challenging all students to achieve high levels of success,” which was apparently acceptable to the parent, who respectfully nodded in agreement. But that question stuck with me for years.

Visions drive organizations into the future. Bolman and Deal (2003) note that “*vision* turns an organization’s core ideology, or sense of purpose, into an image of what the future might become” (p. 252). Because of the importance of vision to a school, it must be clear to the entire school community. Sparks (2007) observes that successful leaders must “cultivate clarity regarding values and fundamental purposes that are most important” (p. 13).

In today’s schools, particularly in high schools such as the one that Kafele leads, educators value their creativity and autonomy. Some independently minded educators may equate articulating a consistent, clear vision with attempting to herd cats. Fortunately, autonomy and shared vision are not mutually exclusive. Kafele maintains that staff members can coexist and thrive under a common vision. He secures the support of his staff by rejecting micromanagement in favor of tying teachers’ individual strengths to a shared vision of success for all students.

Kafele believes in keeping vision statements simple. Use one sentence—two at most—and make sure it identifies a clear direction. Kafele’s most recent school’s vision statement is “Newark Tech will become a national model of urban educational excellence” (Essex County Vocational Technical Schools, 2011). This simple, concise statement is easily memorized and understood. And, as demonstrated by the many awards and accolades received by the school, it has been achieved.

The Importance of Visibility

Vision and visibility are necessarily intertwined for today’s school leaders. Whereas each is important in its own right, given the numerous challenges that today’s building leader faces, they must be fused together to sustain success.

Principal Kafele’s tall frame is often seen striding down the hallways of his school, from room to room, with the deliberate purpose of interacting with students. He explains, “You show me a school with a principal behind the desk, and I’ll show you a school without principal leadership.” The successful principal must be constantly “taking the pulse” of the school community. Kafele views successful visibility through both an individual and a team lens,

noting that “in basketball, you recall Larry Bird and Magic Johnson were often out there and visible, though they were also content to allow the team around them to grow and win. Sometimes they carried the team, other times they were more in the periphery, but together they won.” Similarly, Kafele notes that although he is usually “out there” serving as a visible leader, he can’t be everywhere at once; to realize sustained success, he must have a strong team around him.

Above all, Kafele stresses availability and consistency as the key elements of visibility.

Availability

Kafele ensures that he is constantly available to those with whom he works, particularly students. In a video documentary about Principal Kafele (Milken Family Foundation, 2010), a parent happily observes that “his students have his cell phone number; they can call him 24 hours [a day], and that’s really unheard of.” He has also been known to tweet news of students’ achievements from airports while awaiting connecting flights.

Other educators may make themselves available through designated online office hours during which they respond immediately to e-mails or instant messages about school-related issues. Availability might mean attending a community breakfast at a local housing complex to celebrate a tutoring program in the district, or it might mean dropping by a Little League game where a number of students and families congregate. Availability says, “I am working with you—here, in our community—to make a difference. You matter to me, and I want our work to matter to you.” Although the means of availability may differ, the importance of it does not.

Consistency

Successful educational leaders build regular “touch points” into their day during which they consistently reach out to the school community. Kafele’s touch points occur during students’ arrival at the beginning of the day, morning announcements, and daily classroom visits. Other principals may make sure to attend certain sporting events or engage in community

activities. However leaders choose to structure their touch points, they must be willing to be a visible presence, even at the end of a grueling day. Members of the school community appreciate being able to count on seeing their leaders consistently. As the new principal of a school that had recently experienced rapid turnover of principals, I realized that establishing routines and consistently following them built important relational trust. I asked our music teacher to identify and update a school song, which provided us with a new Friday morning ritual of song and celebration over the intercom. I served as a Bingo caller for the community night picnic. And I swallowed my pride each year and participated in the annual talent show, usually with a break-dancing routine. These touch-point opportunities were a way for me to be a lead player in the school community, and students, staff, and parents soon looked to me (and my colleagues) to lead and share. This consistent involvement fed an expectation of sharing my vision for greater school community in a visible, tangible way. If a school's vision includes "growing together as a community," then the school leader must be an active presence and willing to build trust, share laughs, and interact in a meaningful way.

24-Hour Visibility

The role of educational leader can be compared to the fast-paced 24-hour news cycle. Educators, like politicians or other headliners, cannot escape public scrutiny—even in the grocery store! As a principal, I was keenly aware of what was in my grocery cart when I shopped after a long workday. Parents and students would come up to me, often just to say hello—but maybe to peek in my cart, too! It comes with the territory. Although we might not feel comfortable giving out our cell phone numbers to the school community, we should always be mindful that we are public servants and find ways to use our "celebrity" to promote our vision. When you encounter students and their parents at the carnival or the local park, remind them of the next school event or praise the students' recent achievement gains. When we live the life of a visible leader, reinforcing the vision should come naturally.

Overcoming Challenges

Putting forth a vision and then living it is no small task. In a school setting, the principal is the leader in articulating and living the vision. However, he or she cannot, and must not, do this work alone. Shared leadership is vitally important here. As Johnson (2008) puts it, “A principal with vision and expertise creates a blueprint of how the school can achieve its goals. He or she finds teachers and staff to help make that vision a reality. The principal continually coaches and mentors the staff so that together they can accomplish the desired results” (p. 72).

Many leaders can quickly be derailed or lose the support of their school communities by failing to recognize what the organization is doing right and affirming “quick wins” that are already occurring, or by simply not getting the job done. The leader must be a doer and bring the organization—the department or school—along in realizing the vision.

Work from the Current State

A successful school leader understands the current state—the reality as it stands *now*. Recognizing the current state requires both personal reflection and the ability to manage and make decisions based on data. As Patterson and colleagues (2008) note in the book *Influencer*, it is important to “diagnose before you prescribe” (p. 258). This multifaceted understanding enables the leader to foster change and growth in the organization. A successful leader will be able and willing to adapt the school’s vision to the ever-changing current state to facilitate continued success.

Find “Quick Wins”

It is important that the leader notch some quick wins to demonstrate that success is not only possible, but is also happening now. Doug Reeves (2009) advises leaders to “pull the weeds before you plant the flowers” (p. 13)—that is, reduce existing and less essential initiatives to clear space for the critical items that they are “drowning under” (p. 14). Establishing clear priorities creates a sense of authenticity and demonstrates that the leader will do what it

takes to support the common vision. Many successful principals make seemingly minor improvements, such as adding a coat of paint or mulching the grounds to rejuvenate the school's immediate appearance. These actions will build momentum and align support for a shared, larger vision that encompasses every aspect of the school community.

Follow Through

As obvious as it sounds, it is nonetheless essential for the leader to ensure that the work aligned with the vision gets done. As the saying goes, "Leadership is about action, not position." Simply manning the desk in an efficient manner does not make a great principal; rather, greatness lies in the transformative steps that the leader takes each day to make the vision come alive. Bossidy and Charan (2002) note that although planning and envisioning are important, it is *execution* that is the key role of the leader. Educational leaders will be seen as truly transformative when actual, noticeable change is occurring—particularly when that change is aligned with the vision that has been shared and lived in a consistent, visible manner. Davies and Brighouse (2010) note that "values without implementation do little for the school. It is in the tackling of difficult challenges to change and improve, often by confronting unacceptable practices, that passionate leaders show their educational values" (p. 4).

Baruti Kafele notes that plenty of his peer principals have identified the same challenges that he has and are just as aware of best practices and necessary next steps. Not all leaders, however, are successful at effective implementation through a determined, visionary approach. When Kafele was an assistant principal, "One of the first things I did was get permission from my principal to change the look of the building by putting up motivational messages and images and speak on the PA system to have morning announcements. I needed to change the climate and culture. The very next year, I was principal of the school."

A few specific action items can make a significant difference in realizing a school's vision.

Action Items

Without action, a vision is just a piece of paper. In education, we have lots of paper; sometimes, it doesn't mean much at all. For the vision to be achieved, it must be seen as something vibrant and real. The following Action Items will help ensure that your school's vision thrives.

Make Morning Announcements

Kafele says, "One thing that makes me cringe is when I am visiting a school and the day starts and the bell rings, and I don't hear the principal's voice over the intercom first thing. [Students] have got to see me first thing; they have got to hear me. It begins with morning announcements. Those interactions, conversations, and delivering that motivational message each morning to reverberate throughout the building" convey a message of high expectations to students. Kafele structures his announcements to include these four components:

- A greeting;
- An inspirational thought;
- Highlights of success within the school; and
- A challenge to begin the day.

Kafele's announcements are a consistent, visible way to communicate his school's vision, and the school community has come to rely on hearing his voice each morning. His superintendent notes that he is a "master teacher" through his use of morning announcements to recognize student success and, when necessary, encourage students to complete work, meet deadlines, and achieve to their capabilities.

Send a Daily E-mail to Staff

In a world where teachers and staff are inundated with communications, administrative e-mails are often met with groans and cringes—if the messages get noticed at all. I resolved this problem in my own school by starting to send a concise daily e-mail (see Figure 1.1 for an example) that contained