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CHAPTER 1

The Discipline of Vision and Values



Every serious student of the subject asserts that leaders must have the capacity to envision an uplifting and ennobling image of the future and to enlist others in a common purpose. That's the good news. Here's the bad news. Today's leaders stink at it.

—James Kouzes and Barry Posner

The concept of *vision* often feels vague and out of reach. Yet vision is and will be one of the most potent change weapons in your leadership life. Vision, when led extremely well, becomes the driver of change for your district, school, or program area. There are dozens of definitions of vision. My only caution is to be clear about the difference between *mission* and *vision*. Simply defined, mission is *why* your job and the school organization exist—your fundamental purpose. You can usually state the mission in one short sentence. For example, I subscribe to the PLC mission that is summed up in the simple mantra “Success for every student.” Your mission—your reason for why the school or district exists—cannot be more complicated than for all adults to educate *as a PLC* in order to ensure the social, emotional, and academic success of every child.

On the other hand, vision moves the school organization beyond the question of *why* we exist to the question of *what* we should become. What are the most

essential aspirations and pursuits that will guide current action, future direction, and your responsibility for improved results? Vision answers the question, are we really doing work that matters? Vision provides the focus and coherence necessary to avoid the natural drift toward mediocrity and stagnation. Vision describes how good we can become, and paints a picture of what it will look like when we get there.

For a leader, being able to rely on and teach about a rock-solid vision is essential. Indeed, it is the foundation of all other aspects of PLC leadership. With more than 1,300 leadership books on vision development alone, the case for the lifelong pursuit of improving your skill in this discipline is clear. Without a deep understanding of your personal vision and values, as well as the shared vision and values of the school organization, your leadership decision making will appear random, disjointed, and often disconnected. Those following you—those within your sphere of influence—will be left to wonder exactly where the school “ship” is headed.

Every school leader is capable of effectively developing a vision and teaching it well to others. You just have to train in the discipline. Let’s review the definition of the discipline of vision and values:

The leadership work of developing and delivering a compelling picture of the school’s future that produces energy, passion, and action in yourself and others

Effective PLC leaders are well trained in painting a compelling picture of a better future, enlisting others in its development, and using the vision to bring *sustained* coherence, clarity, energy, and focus to future adult commitments and actions for school or district programs. They embrace the word *imagine* to describe exciting possibilities of what could be:

- Imagine a school where every student has access to and equal opportunity for success in each grade level and each course within the curriculum.
- Imagine a school where every student has access to relevant, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences every day.
- Imagine a school where technology strategies are integrated into the student learning experience and used as a tool for engagement and motivation every day.
- Imagine a school where every faculty and staff member works interdependently and positively in a collaborative community to erase inequities in student learning.

- Imagine a school where every administrator, faculty member, and staff member is fully engaged in and enjoys his or her work.
- Imagine a school where every teacher uses formative and summative assessments that inform, enhance, and motivate student learning and improve instruction.

What is in your *imagine* list?

Your training in this discipline helps you to understand that a vision cannot be true or false but ultimately is evaluated against other possible directions for the school or district. A vision leader asks, Does our vision paint a picture that is better or worse than current practice? More or less appropriate? More or less compelling? More or less energizing? More or less ambitious?

A PLC leader must also be able to identify and articulate essential PLC *values*. You should be clear about the difference between *values* and *goals*. If mission addresses why we exist, and vision paints the picture of what we aspire to become someday, then values represent the *commitments to action* necessary to ensure the vision is realized. Goals represent the measurable student outcomes or results that will reveal whether the adult commitments to action and effort have actually helped move the organization or school program closer to the vision. Goals are the *outputs* of our work. Your adult work life is aimless unless it actually results in children who are both smart (able to demonstrate successful learning of essential knowledge and skills) and good (able to demonstrate good citizenship and positive moral character).

In a professional learning community, then, goals are distinct from values or commitments to action. And yet, mission, vision, values, and goals are woven tightly together. The PLC leader understands the vision will not be realized without adult commitment to the behaviors and actions that support it as well as evidence that the actions will lead to measurable improvement in student learning and development. In the best PLC cultures, vision and values ultimately become the driving force behind the decision-making process that takes place every day in a particular area of school leadership.

Connecting Your Personal Vision and Values to Daily Decision Making

During my first year at Stevenson, as director of the Mathematics and Science Division (essentially a department chairmanship with assistant principal duties), I often struggled to make decisions that were best for my division and for the

Through the leadership discipline of accountability and celebration, it is possible to create a culture in which all adults engage in the difficult work of turning the school's vision into implemented action. And to master this discipline requires deep management and leadership skills in harmony with one another. This discipline requires effective monitoring of action—management. It also requires brokering of action, change, and shifts to meet the vision—leadership. You must manage and lead others toward the vision.

How do you gain confidence that you can manage *and* lead the transfer of vision into practice? To paraphrase John Kotter (1999), strong school leadership with no management risks chaos. Strong management without leadership entrenches the school or district into a deadly bureaucracy with little engagement and almost no accountability for implementation. Do we really have to collaborate and *do* any of this vision stuff? is the silent, or sometimes not too silent, question asked by many of the adults in our sphere of leadership influence.

Although good management skills are necessary to support vision implementation and action, they are not sufficient. Through good management you can create a great vision for your area of school leadership and support structures for that vision. Yet it takes leadership skill to transition those you lead into actual implementation of and action on the vision. Leadership creates the relationships and designs the strategies of accountability and celebration necessary to make the vision come alive.

Your ability to turn vision into action is built upon the foundation and trained practice in the discipline of *accountability and celebration*. Let's review the definition of this discipline:

The leadership work of delivering specific improvement in student achievement results and monitoring stakeholder actions that lead to those results, with consequences

These two elements of this discipline of school leadership, accountability and celebration, are tightly interwoven. Both are necessary to drive every continuous improvement effort you will lead. Accountability without celebration—of improved results and the adult actions that led to those results—leads to diminished hope, uncertainty, disengagement, and a general lack of awareness that action and implementation of the vision actually make a difference. Celebration without accountability leads to superficial festivity that is emotionally empty at best and promotes a random or false sense of progress at worst.

Thus, this leadership discipline presents these practices as an intricately matched, interdependent pair. Together they define the fundamental leadership practices that turn vision into action, implementation, and reality.

Accountability and celebration are the leadership glue for sustainable continuous improvement and growth toward the vision, and yet they are extremely difficult to do well. Lack of clear definition and purpose has rendered *accountability* and *celebration* as often misunderstood and negative terms. Even if we understand them as essential leadership practices, we often fail to implement them well. Thinking about the attributes of the terms *accountability* and *celebration* provides insight into how individuals may respond to them. The matrix in table 2.1 provides examples of the attributes of each term. (Visit go.solution-tree.com/plcbooks to download a reproducible version of this matrix on which you can list your own attributes of each term.)

Table 2.1 Accountability-Celebration Matrix

Accountability	Celebration
Punishing	Positive
Failure	Energizing
Pressure	Encouraging
Negative	Joy
Stress	Progress
Blame	Hope
Unfair expectations	Hard to do well
Something done to me	Something I do for others

Under *Accountability* (table 2.1), leaders often list words like *punishing*, *failure*, *negative efforts*, *stress*, *pressure*, *blame*, *unfair standards*, *unfair expectations*, *quality assurance*, *district or state reports*, and *mandates*. Often referenced as the *hand* of leadership, accountability represents a limited (although essential) lens on your role as a leader (Sergiovanni, 2005). The very word places most school leaders on the defensive. To many, accountability seems like something done to you by someone else. One definition rendered by the Education Commission of the