Essential Leadership Skills, Part I
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Essential Leadership Skills, Part I

The profession of lactation consulting is still very young, and its continued growth and maturation requires good leadership. With good leadership, we can accomplish our goals and make a difference in the world. In this 4-part series, the author will describe some essential leadership skills. Part I begins with understanding the importance of a clear vision.

Defining Vision

In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech delivered in 1963, the US civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr, described a vision of a world free from racial barriers and prejudice. He dedicated his life to bringing that vision to reality. By defining such a clear vision, King demonstrated an important component of leadership. Effective leaders define and articulate a powerful and compelling vision for their organization. Organizations without vision lose direction and purpose. Good leadership requires an understanding of the main components of vision.

Vision Is Immutable or Unchanging

Vision is often confused with an organization’s mission. Mission describes why an organization exists, whereas vision describes what the organization wants to create. Vision is “what could be and should be.”¹ An organization’s mission, goals, and objectives are used as tools to achieve the organization’s vision. King didn’t say, “I have a goal”—he said, “I have a dream.” Missions can change, goals and objectives can change, but an organization’s vision remains constant.

Vision provides stability and purpose for an organization. This stability is critical because environmental factors that impact an organization can change significantly over time. Just as important, a clear and compelling vision can bring about changes in attitudes and behavior. It can unite and inspire people. The United States Declaration of Independence’s powerfully stated self-evident truth that “all men are created equal” provided a vision for social equality and justice. This vision has inspired thought and action for more than 200 years, and it carries the same powerful message now as it did during the American Revolution.

Vision Is Challenging

“Great visions are like high walls.”¹ A compelling vision defines what could and should be, but achieving this vision can be daunting. A visionary leader must define a problem, identify a solution, and determine what must be done. Vision requires change, and change is uncomfortable. Thus, vision is often met with opposition. A leader, however, can use vision to overcome opposition and commit to a new possibility. Commitment to vision, in short, requires the “commitment of a parachutist—you’re either in the plane or in the air.”¹

In the early 19th century, English parliamentarian and social activist William Wilberforce had the vision to end the worldwide trade in slavery. His vision was initially very much a minority view. He was actively opposed by forces with substantial funding and the majority opinion at that time. Wilberforce, however, had courage, conviction of his vision, and commitment.² After decades of effort, he prevailed. In contrast, abolitionists in the United States lost sight of their vision of “equal rights for all.” At the end of the US Civil War in 1865, abolitionists had the opportunity to work toward equal rights for former slaves and women. However, by focusing on the “mission” of freeing the slaves, an opportunity was missed to achieve their original vision of equal rights for all. The vision of legal equality for African Americans and women would not be achieved until the second half of the twentieth century.

Vision Is Active

Vision is unchanging, but that does not mean it’s passive or inert. A well-defined vision is a call to action. It’s something that must be done and done now. A powerful, active vision challenges an organization or a community to take action and effect change because it’s the right thing to do.
Vision Provides Clarity

An organization that accepts the challenge and commits to change will face multiple obstacles and detours. A well-articulated and compelling vision, however, clarifies goals and objectives and prevents an organization from losing direction or becoming side-tracked. Thomas Fuller, a 17th century moralist, famously stated that, “He that is everywhere is nowhere.” A vision that rallies and focuses an organization has a moral character that “enables everyone concerned with an enterprise to see clearly what is ahead of them” and to know that they are working toward something that will ultimately benefit society.

Defining a Vision Takes Time

Good leaders gather objective information and listen to many perspectives before drawing the “big picture.” Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War I flying ace, stated “Think things through—then follow through.” Rickenbacker understood that vision unites thought and action. A leader takes the time to diligently listen to constituents to determine what could and should be, but he or she also has the courage to commit to the vision.

A Chinese proverb says:

If your vision is for a year, plant wheat.
If your vision is for ten years, plant trees.
If your vision is for a lifetime, plant people.

Leadership, whether it be leading a business, a professional organization, or a community, begins with defining and articulating a clear and compelling vision. As we look ahead, I would like to challenge all of us to define a vision of what could and should be. “I have a dream . . .”

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References