

Finding and Growing Leaders

An Interview with ISTE Deputy CEO
Leslie Conery



This article is the first in a series of conversations with ISTE executives about leadership. Leslie Conery focuses on the varied ways ISTE helps promote leadership within the field of educational technology.

Shifts in technology have always been an important consideration for educators. In fact, if we define technology as any kind of tool students use to facilitate learning, the migration from slates to fountain pens to pencils can be seen as major technological classroom innovation. The advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, however, created the need for a new kind of leadership, leadership centered in the understanding of the potential of computing technology and the extent to which it could or should change how teachers teach and how students learn.

By Chris Stephenson

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Audience: Administrators, technology coordinators, technology integration specialists, technology facilitators, teacher educators, library media specialists, teachers

Standards: NETS•TV; NETS•A I
(<http://www.iste.org/standards/>)

Leaders ... make the vision so compelling that you want to go with them.

To a large extent, the growing use of computer technology throughout society has been a major impetus for the increased integration of computers in schools, as there is a growing expectation that one must have achieved a level of technological fluency in order to function effectively in society. As now-retired administrator Ronald Costello noted in a November 1997 *T.H.E. Journal* article, the question is no longer whether students will use technology, but whether educators want to have any impact on how students use it. If educators do not take a leadership role in implementing educational technology, others will do so, and the end result will not necessarily be in the best interests of students or education.

Because the manner in which technology is implemented is more important than any intrinsic characteristic of the technology itself, effective implementation requires leaders who are skilled in developing technological solutions to identified educational problems and then building theoretical, political, and financial structures to ensure the solutions' success. The problem, however, is that promoting and developing educational technology leadership is not exactly high on the priority list of many schools or school districts, and with increasing financial pressure on the education system from cutbacks, opportunities for professional development have become scarce for many educators. For this reason, professional associations such as ISTE are taking on more and

more of the responsibility for creating the vision for educational technology and nurturing the leadership required to achieve that vision.

This is the first of three interviews with ISTE leaders looking at various levels of educational technology leadership and leadership development at ISTE. This first interview with Deputy CEO Dr. Leslie Conery examines the need for educational technology leadership and looks at various ways ISTE fulfills this need. In the May 2004 issue of *L&L*, CEO Dr. Don Knezek focuses on U.S. policy, legislation, and advocacy. In September 2004, Board President Dr. Jan Van Dam shares her thoughts on the importance of volunteer leadership.

Leslie has served in various capacities for ISTE since 1985, currently as executive management overseeing the operations of ISTE's Eugene, Oregon, offices. Like many educational technology leaders, her experience is solidly grounded in classroom realities and includes teaching at the elementary, high school, and university levels. Leslie also served as a member of the Leadership Team for the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) project, a member of the Leadership Team for Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA), and a member of the National Staff Development Council Online Learning Task Force. Currently she is an ISTE representative to the team supporting the development of the U.S. National Educational Technology Plan.

Q&A

L&L: How do you personally define leadership?

Leslie: For me, leadership is the ability to convey a shared vision, to get people on board with that vision and moving in the same direction. Leaders do not coerce. They make the vision so compelling that you want to go with them.

L&L: Do you believe the field of educational technology requires special qualities from its leaders?

Leslie: I think educational technology requires a real penchant for looking at things from multiple perspectives and helping people do that. When we talk about what educational technology can do in schools in terms of learning, I think we really have to help people understand what it is we are talking about and guide people through a process of seeing things more systematically. For instance, with ISTE we know that to be really effective about our organizational vision we need to be out there working with other organizations. It is really important that we work with the reading, math, language arts, and social studies groups; the principals' associations; and teacher organizations such as NEA and AFT. It is communication, but it is also thinking clearly about coalitions and what kind of things need to happen to get to the end goal.

L&L: Do you see Ed Tech leaders as mavericks?

The main leadership focus now is understanding what it takes to get something done, how to have a vision and the steps it takes to get there.

Leslie: You can be a maverick and be an educational technology leader, but also I think there is a core value and an understanding about teaching and learning and then seeing what technology can do that is not maverickish. We know where we want kids to be, we know what is possible for kids to be able to do, we can see where the world is going and what's happening, and so helping people understand this and helping them see how technology can work is really somewhat mainstream despite the fact that there are some pressures against it.

L&L: Do you think the current generation of Ed Tech leaders is transforming the education system or just finding different ways to do the same things?

Leslie: Are the Ed Tech leaders transforming the entire system? They are trying, but the system is so entrenched and is such a monolith that making change is incredibly difficult. One group of people is not able to change the basic structure of education and start over from scratch.

Are we effective at changing the entire model? No, but are people understanding what needs to be done and trying every way that they can to make that happen? I think so. I sure hear a lot of conversations asking where the leverage points or the tipping points are, where we can change things, where the spots are that we can shake up the system as a whole and do things that make radical change.

L&L: Are we running the risk of burning out our current Ed Tech leaders or is there more concern with developing the next generation?

Leslie: My primary concern is that there isn't a new group of people

coming in to assume the mantle. We have to be very careful to identify people who have shown leadership skills but have not yet had a chance to play them out. We have to be figuring out how to grow leaders, to get them to our conference and onto our committees. Not everyone is cut out to be a leader, not everyone has those skills, but unless you start filling the pipeline, this whole cohort of folks is just going to get older and older and then there is not going to be anybody to take their places.

L&L: Do you see ISTE as fulfilling a role that is currently not being met for its members in terms of professional and leadership development?

Leslie: Yes. In terms of their professional development, I don't know of any other organization that focuses on leadership. When we share information and when we do things at ISTE, the emphasis is on concepts and structures and why you would do something. NETS are standards, but they are also a superstructure as opposed to going out and teaching how to use a specific product. For example, I don't know of any other organization that is bringing technology coordinators together to help move the field forward as a whole. There are other organizations that do bits and pieces of it, but I think that we fill a need that is just not otherwise being met. What ISTE does is help people understand the why and give examples of things being used in context.

For example, ISTE has been organizing meetings with teachers within school districts to focus on what happens in the classroom to support the integration of technology into the curriculum. At these meetings, we are specifically addressing what kind of leadership is needed at all levels in

schools to ensure that the technology is used effectively by teachers and students in support of learning. We are also bringing together numerous other educational organizations that, while they are not centrally focused on educational technology, work with this technology and share our concern for supporting teachers. Our goal with these meetings is to find ways we can work together to support teaching and learning.

We also try to provide a great deal of practical, relevant information to our members through our publications and periodicals. If you look at just three of our periodicals—*Learning & Leading with Technology*, the *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, and the *Journal of Computing in Teacher Education*, for example—you can see that we try to provide valuable information on research, implementations for the classroom, program planning and evaluation, and best practices. Our goal for our publications, as for ISTE as a whole, is to meet as many of the needs of our diverse membership as possible.

L&L: How important is it for leaders in this field to develop a professional network?

Leslie: It is critical and certainly not unique in educational technology. The difficulty depends on where you sit and what kind of leader you are. For the people who are leaders in the classroom, it is difficult to build that strong network, because folks in the classroom are less able to move around in space and time. They are constrained by the need to be in the classroom working with the kids, and so although telecommunications and the ability to do online collaboration are there, I think it is harder.

There is also often a sense of isolation, because the other people they are most likely to find affinity with might well be outside their classroom or outside their buildings. If

you can build a network within your school, then I think you are fine, but I think there are still not enough people in any given school. This is also exacerbated by what is happening economically, because the money that helps people attend professional development within their district or their region and certainly at the state and national level has dried up. This is exactly the kind of place where you could go to be among people who share the same vision and build a network and be regenerated to go back and be the lone voice or one of two voices in your own building.

L&L: What would you say is the most important benefit educators receive for belonging to a professional association such as ISTE?

Leslie: Probably the number one thing people get as a benefit of membership is being part of a group sharing similar interests and goals. Being part of a community increases your access to information, be it print or verbal, formal or informal. It also reduces the sense of isolation many educators experience. When you belong to a community, you know that other people out there share the same challenges.

L&L: Do you think the needs of your members have changed over the years and if so, how has ISTE changed to meet those needs?

Leslie: Absolutely. In the very beginning the need was for flat-out information, just “how does this work?” or “how do I do this or that?” It has moved toward a need for leadership. It is not just about educational technology. The main leadership focus now is understanding what it takes to

get something done, how to have a vision and the steps it takes to get there.

What ISTE needs to do now is not only meet the professional needs of teachers in the classroom and people who are doing the jobs, but also be thinking about how to move the field forward, how to provide the leadership, and how to galvanize the people in leadership or potential leadership positions. The goal is to do this systematically, to kind of wrap the arms around everyone who is part of this community and say “Okay, how can we move the field forward?”

L&L: It seems to me that what you are saying here is that advocacy is an aspect of leadership. In terms of ISTE’s role in educational technology leadership, you refer to it as moving the agenda forward. Do you think that taking on this role required, not just a certain kind of focus, but a certain shift in leadership modes as well?

Leslie: Yes, the need to do advocacy caused a major upheaval in the organization and led to our adding a Washington, D.C., office. Our CEO, Don Knezek, now resides on the East Coast in an office with three other people. I think this is a major change. There has also been a shift in how people spend their time. As CEO, Don is highly visible. He tries to be at all the important places. He is constantly moving. This is a different kind of a leadership too, because when he is out there, he is sharing the ISTE vision and what we want to do as an organization.

L&L: Have there been bumpy parts along the road in making this transition to a more advocacy-focused organization?

Leslie: There are constant challenges in meeting the needs of individual members and thinking like a membership organization. We can help our members by helping them on Monday. We can also help our members by making the climate and the understanding about educational technology different, by making money flow, by helping the people at the federal government understand the value of educational technology and educational technology programs and the importance of things like the E-rate. Those things don’t happen quickly, and they don’t help a third-grade teacher on Monday, but they do make the whole system run and move forward. The challenge, the thing we constantly have to ask ourselves is, “are we balancing this right?”

L&L: In terms of your personal development as a leader, what do you think has been the most difficult but also the most useful thing you have learned?

Leslie: To take yourself out of the equation and to be able to focus on what you are trying to achieve. It is sometimes difficult to understand that it is not about what people think about me or what I am trying to say, it is not about people disagreeing with me, or whether people will like me or my behavior. It is about where we need to go, how we are going to get there, what things I can do to get us there.



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