

By Denise Sommers

# Information Leadership... Leading with the End in Mind

INFORMATION LEADERSHIP IS AN APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP THAT USES DATA TO DRIVE THE MISSION, VISION AND VALUES INTO THE DAILY WORK.



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**T**HE LEADERSHIP OF ANY ORGANIZATION IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SETTING AND COMMUNICATING A MISSION, AN INSPIRING VISION AND A SET OF CORE VALUES. The leadership is also responsible for establishing a management system to achieve the mission and vision while adhering to core values. Many organizations do an excellent job of creating the mission, vision and values as a part of their strategic planning process. They also follow through with establishing doable action plans as a precursor to a quality management system.

Where organizations, including school districts, often fall short is embedding this important leadership into their daily work. Information leadership (IL) is an approach to leadership that uses data to drive the mission, vision and values into the daily work. IL also helps keep the focus on mission, vision and values by defining and analyzing the organization's success in terms of quantitative and qualitative data—which is directly aligned to the mission, vision and values, and is communicated constantly to all stakeholders, including employees.

## Defining the Mission

Student success is our mission. This seems logical, yet is very difficult to find. Many district mission statements contain hints of student success, but often include caveats about student talents that leave the district an out if it doesn't achieve full student success. Even if the mission statement is clearly focused on student success, the definition of what defines student

success is usually missing from supporting documents. In the absence of this clarity, other measures of success become the de facto definition—implementation of the latest reform initiative, selected student group successes (*i.e.*, scholarship dollars earned, ACT scores), faculty credentialing, facilities quality, compliance with rules and regulations. All of these may be important, but none directly define student success.

The first step of IL is to clearly lay out a mission of student success and back it up with a clear definition of what that means. The measures must be directly related to student performance and be as devoid of programs or practices as possible. Programs and practices are tools to achieve student success and thus must be left as choices for employees to select.

## Setting the Vision

Vision statements are often well meaning yet lofty with little chance for determining success or failure. IL requires vision statements that are inspiring, bold and clear. These vision statements must minimally embody some future desired state regarding student success. The clarity of student success created in the mission definition phase makes the vision statement easier to produce and keeps a direct link between the two.

Vision statements can further clarify the school district's desired future state in terms of organizational accomplishments as well. These add unique, enriching statements that help define a district's aspirations for recognition, organizational quality, efficiency, breadth of service, or any other aspect that is valued by the dis-



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trict's community and governance board.

Vision statements, like the mission, are best focused on the future, not particular programs or practices. Inserting specific programs or practices into the vision statements decreases the options employees have available to them to achieve the mission and vision statements. Some process determinations may appear, but the less specific they are the better.

Vision statements should also encourage comparison to 'best in class' organizations. Through comparison with high-performing organizations, the district can encourage all employees to be better than they probably thought they could be. This is accomplished through employee knowledge and awareness, not forced upon them through reform initiatives, directives or procedural mandates.

IL requires that all vision statements be defined to allow for measurement of

progress. This assures an intense focus on the vision statements and provides an opportunity to celebrate progress. It also encourages periodic review of the vision statements as they are achieved. Once achieved, new, more aggressive vision statements can be crafted and deployed.

## Clarifying Core Values

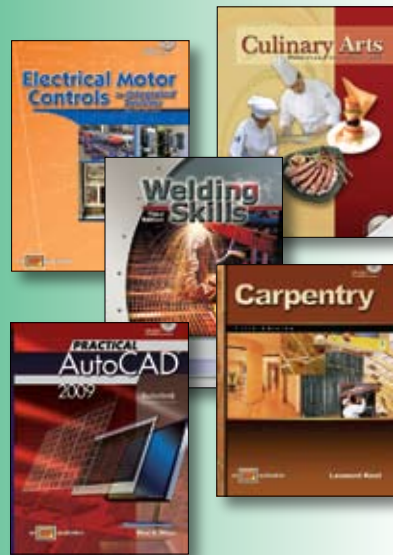
Values are easy to talk about, difficult to narrow, and even more difficult to embed in daily work. Core values should address at least the following:

- expectations for student success;
- student engagement (both current and potential);
- ethics;
- faculty and staff engagement;
- stakeholder engagement; and
- organizational quality, including efficiency.

Core values around student success are very important. Two powerful value statements are "Every student can learn," and "Educational experiences can overcome all other factors to assure student success." Without these specific core values in place, no district can achieve the levels of student success our society hopes for and needs.

Once established, there must be a clear deployment of the core values. This requires a clear communication process and constant referencing of these values as work is undertaken. Visual reminders and regular approaches to decision-making are critical to keeping core values at the forefront for all employees. IL requires that core values definition and deployment be measured on a periodic basis. Often these measurements are subjective assessments of employee, student and stakeholder perceptions. Other times they

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are tangible measures of actions. Regardless, the deployment of core values is critical to mission accomplishment.

### Embedding Mission, Vision and Values into Daily Work

Mission, vision and values are relatively easy to define, but are useless unless embedded in daily work. Too often, these critical statements are defined, written in a strategic plan, and then placed on the organizational shelf. What puts them on the shelf is the onslaught of rules and regulations, reform initiatives, constituent interests, political intrigue, cultural norms and institutional convenience that assure the status quo. Changing the daily work is the only real way the mission, vision and values can make a difference.

IL requires a change in management processes so they are aligned to the mission, vision and values. This alignment comes in the form of changed procedures. Often this requires a dramatic and revolutionary departure from the common wisdom of practitioners. This alignment process makes sure the organization is “walking the talk.” Central to IL, these procedure changes must come from all levels of the organization, and must be driven by all employees being fully aware of the performance results for the organization and for their work. Further, these employees must be given significant latitude for change in their work practices.

Let’s assume that the mission of a district is to assure student success. One of its vision statements is to be the highest performing district in the state. One of its core values is all students can learn and the district can overcome past student experiences in assuring this learning. Here are some examples of practices that would assure alignment with the mission, vision and values set forth by the district:

### Performance Transparency

Performance transparency at all levels of the organization is critical to effective

improvement and IL. To be consistent with a mission of student success, a vision of being the best, and a value that all students can learn, the district would have to share how well it is doing at the organizational, school and faculty level. Further, it would have to compare its results with the best performers in the state.

Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* notes that people who are unwilling to admit imperfections have a negative impact on learning. Collins in his book *Good to Great* notes the importance of “facing the brutal facts.” An article in *The New Yorker* regarding cystic fibrosis tells about how sharing patient mortality rates had a very positive impact on patient care. Many school districts and faculty fight any effort to report and compare their student success rates. This lack of transparency never lets anyone know how well they are doing. Protecting the reputation of the organization, the school and/or faculty members becomes the new mission. Clearly this is contrary to the spoken mission.

IL demands the sharing of performance data and the comparison of such data with “best in class” districts. This sharing replaces mandates, rules and regulations, directives and reform initiatives as the way to encourage instructional practice improvement. Performance transparency recognizes that most faculty and staff are hard working and want to successfully meet student needs. It acknowledges that faculty and staff are in the best position to troubleshoot why students don’t succeed and take corrective action. Sharing performance data helps everyone be honest about the impact of current practice so change is desired and possible.

### Job Descriptions

If student success is the mission, then job descriptions need to be aligned to this mission. Job descriptions must define the job as improving student success, not

## Information leadership focuses on clearly defining what success means to the organization in terms of mission, vision and values.

the completion of specific processes. For example, most principal job descriptions include an expectation to evaluate faculty. Under IL, the decision to evaluate faculty is dependent upon whether this process will improve student performance. There is some indication that professional coaching and professional learning communities have more significant impact on student success improvement than regular evaluations.

### Feedback Systems

Student performance is the ultimate evaluation of organizational and employee success, but student success is too far removed from daily work to effectively inform process improvements. Feedback systems based on best-practice research must be put into place to help inform employees on a more regular basis. Feedback systems such as survey information, assessments and process performance measures (leading measures) must be put into place. These feedback systems must be prohibited from being a part of evaluations so fear doesn’t thwart information sharing, analysis and experimentation. IL requires these feedback systems to be subservient to student success.

### Evaluations and Pay Structures

If the mission is student success, employees must be evaluated on the extent to which they achieve the mission and they should be compensated accordingly. Tenure-based pay systems and performance incentive programs based on credentialing, compliance with rules, or good relations with superiors must be replaced with performance-based pay increases and bonuses. IL systems must

also recognize the importance of the team in student success. While individual pay increases can be based on individual student success results, any performance bonuses should be based on organizational success. This encourages collaboration and recognizes the importance of all employees in the student success creation process. For example, a system may place faculty members on evaluation because they are new to the district; they have poor student performance results; or they have had professional discipline problems. All other faculty may experience non-evaluative professional coaching to help high-performing professionals further advance their practice.

### Choosing Professional Development

Professional development is critical to organizational change and improvement. However, most educational professional development is selected on the basis of interest or location, not on the basis of actual impact on student performance. If you have doubts about this, consider the last few professional development experiences you participated in and see if any student performance results were presented to prove the value of the processes or programs shared in the professional development. How often have school districts been touted as high performing, but they come up short of the best when student performance results are shared? Interestingly, most educators have difficulty answering this because of the lack of performance transparency in education. IL requires that all professional development choices be based on student performance results. In addition to student success, professional develop-

ment must also be selected on the basis of environmental factors so learning is focused on successful schools with similar student conditions.

### Grading Systems

If student success is the mission and the value is all students can learn, it is imperative for the school district to design grading systems based on knowledge and skill acquisition. Further, the system must be designed to assure full student success. The typical A to F grading system is designed to sort students on the basis of their success and, by design, expects some students will fail. Selected states and schools have been moving to grading systems based on meeting standards and removing grades below proficient. These changes don’t lower standards, but they do expect faculty and staff to continue to work with students until they achieve success. This is a component promoted by several very successful instructional improvement approaches, such as High Schools That Work.

### Getting Results

Information leadership focuses on clearly defining what success means to the organization in terms of mission, vision and values; measuring the same; sharing the results; and giving employees latitude to change processes to achieve success. Information leadership never prescribes practice, never engages in the latest reform fads (unless they are proven to improve student success and are supported by employees), and never hides results. When a district clearly defines student success and goes about aligning its focus and processes to this student success, the results always improve. ■

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