

Perspectives

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Community College
Leadership for the
21st Century

Leadership Requires Clarity of Vision

James M. Kouzes & Barry Z. Posner

Co-authors of the award-winning
and best-selling leadership book:
The Leadership Challenge

Joan Carter took over as general manager and executive chef of the college's faculty/staff club when members were unhappy, the balance sheet was "scary," and the employees were divided into factions.

Joan took all this in, but what she saw was a "dusty diamond." The picture in her head was of a place bustling, with professors and staff chatting away with one another, while enjoying high-quality, appealing, yet inexpensive meals; with an engaged workforce whose primary concern was customer satisfaction. She wasn't quite sure how the club had deteriorated to the extent it had, but that really didn't matter.

Over the next two years, as she talked with customers and worked with her staff, she instilled a vision of a restaurant that celebrated good food and good company. When asked how she turned the place around so quickly and dramatically, Joan responded, "I just helped the staff realize what we're really all about. It was always here," she said, "only perhaps a little dusty; a little ignored, and a little unloved. I just helped them see it."

We found empirically that the most effective leaders in higher education, according to their direct reports, were those who most frequently Inspire a Shared Vision.

In studying leadership in higher education, we found leaders, like Joan, who echoed the perspective that bringing meaning to life in the present, by focusing on making life better in the long run, was essential in getting extraordinary things done. All enterprises and projects, big or small, originate in the mind's eye; they begin with imagination and with the belief that what's merely an image can one day be made real.

If you are going to be an exemplary leader, you have to be able to imagine a positive future. When you envision the future you want for yourself and others, and when you feel passionate about the legacy you want to leave, you are much more likely to take that first step forward.

But remember it's not just about your vision. It's a shared vision. Everyone dreams, aspires, and desires a tomorrow that is better than today. When visions are shared, they attract more people, sustain higher levels of motivation, and withstand more challenges than those that are singular. You have to make sure that what you can see is also something that others can see, and vice versa.

We found empirically that the most effective leaders in higher education, according to their direct reports, were those who most frequently *Inspire a Shared Vision*. Indeed, there was a remarkable 85% bump in effectiveness from the lowest to the highest quartile in how often leaders used this leadership practice. Similarly, those direct reports who "strongly agreed" that "they were making a difference" indicated that their leaders inspired a shared vision over 48% more often than those who did not believe that what they were doing mattered.

To create a climate of meaningfulness, first you must believe in something yourself. Before you can inspire others, you have to be inspired yourself.

No matter what term is used—whether *vision, purpose, mission, legacy, dream, calling, or burning agenda*—the intent is the same: leaders are those who want to do something significant, accomplishing something that no one else has yet achieved. What that something is—that sense of meaning and purpose—has to come from within. That's why you must first clarify your own visions of the future before you can expect to enlist others in a shared vision. To create a climate of meaningfulness, first you must believe in something yourself. Before you can inspire others, you have to be inspired yourself. Your passion is an indication of what you find worthy in and of itself. It's a clue to what you find *intrinsically* rewarding.

You can't, however, impose a vision on others. It has to be something that has meaning to them, not just to you. Leaders must foster conditions under which people will do things because they want to, not because they have to. One of the most important practices of leadership is giving life and work a sense of meaning and purpose by offering an exciting vision about something in the future that could be better than exists today. Leaders create environments where department, program, or institutional visions and personal values intersect.

Discover Your Theme. Just knowing that a having a vision is important doesn't make one pop out of your head like a bright light bulb. When we ask people to tell us where their visions come from, they often have great difficulty describing the process. And when they do provide an answer, typically it's more about a feeling, a sense, a gut reaction, a hunch. When people first take on their roles as leaders—whether they're appointed or whether they volunteer—they often don't have a clear vision of the future.

In the beginning, what leaders on college campuses typically have is a *theme*. They have concerns, desires,

(continued on page 4)

The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion.
- Theodore Hesburgh

Today's most respected and successful leaders are able to transform fear of the unknown into clear visions of whom to serve, core strengths to leverage and actions to take.
- Maynard Brusman

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Community colleges are widely recognized as vibrant, constantly changing, and critically important institutions. The effective leadership of such dynamic institutions has long required a clarity of vision, but perhaps never more so than today when we are learning that vision is especially urgent during a global crisis as systematic as the current COVID-19 pandemic. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can leaders best clarify and communicate their objectives and inspire others to a shared vision while the pandemic continues to create havoc?

Eugenia White Antoine, MS

Assistant Principal
Roberts Middle School – Lamar CISD
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Vision is defined as being able to see or the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom. It is important to have a vision so that you know where you are going or what you want to accomplish. Achieving success begins with a vision and leaders must be clear and passionate about their vision before they can communicate it to others. A leader's vision should be guided by their values and beliefs and these principles must be equally important to those that leaders want to follow them. Leaders can best clarify and communicate their vision by basing every decision and every action on their values. This builds credibility which is crucial to effective leadership.

To inspire others to follow, leaders must be honest, dependable, transparent, and ethical. Leaders must also build relationships and surround themselves with other like-minded progressive individuals who understand, accept, and commit to work alongside each other to reach a common goal. Teamwork, collaboration, and trust are key factors to inspiring others to a shared vision. It is important that all viewpoints are heard, and the expertise and experience of others are utilized. Everyone should feel strong, capable, and involved in making decisions, thereby building competence and confidence in themselves. When everyone is working together, extraordinary things can happen, such as rethinking how we operate during a global crisis.

COVID-19 has required us to alter how we do things in our personal and professional lives. A community college leaders' main goal is student success and during this current pandemic, leaders must strive to find ways to adapt to ensure that students are learning and being successful. This can be accomplished by encouraging innovative ideas and ingenuity in others and making sure they know that even though they may fail, they must learn from their mistakes and try again, and in doing so, building resilience. This pandemic has thrust education into turbulent times, but it is during these times that leaders should encourage creativity and a growth mindset. These creative ideas should be broken down into actionable steps that can be measured, and the successes celebrated therefore leading to everyone's commitment to the vision.

Community colleges are valuable institutions that play a major role in our society by being open access institutions dedicated to educating everyone and helping every person achieve the American Dream. Community college leaders must develop clarity of vision by establishing and being clear about their values, expressing these values daily, and having these values reflected in every decision they make. They can then inspire others to share this vision through finding a common purpose. These values will be crucial in difficult and uncertain times, such as what we are currently experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic.



Eugenia White Antoine, MS, serves as Assistant Principal at Roberts Middle School – Lamar CISD and as an Adjunct Instructor at Lone Star College. An educational leader who believes education is a gateway to a better life, her goal is to work tirelessly to achieve equity in education. She earned her MS at Barry University in Miami, Florida and is enrolled in Texas Cohort 2 of the Ferris State University Doctorate in Community College Leadership program.

Ted Robles, LMSW

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Institutions of higher education have changed dramatically over the past several decades, facing issues such as changing demographics, state and

federal policy, funding, curricula, developmental education, and challenges linked to diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, for nearly a year now, academe is treading uncharted waters due to a world-wide pandemic, and the business of our institutions is shifting rapidly to adjust to the "new normal." While change is always inevitable, the alarming pace brings about greater uncertainty, confusion, frustration, stress, and anxiety. As faculty, staff, and students look for answers, effective leadership is paramount in establishing directional synthesis that is inclusive and reassuring.

In times of crisis, people want to know and feel that they are protected; they look for a sense of normalcy and homeostasis. As leaders, it is our jobs to ensure that sense of normalcy through communication, shared governance, and clarity of vision. Effective leadership is at the crux of navigating newfound obstacles that have been created due to any unprecedented events. People want to know the "who, what, where, and when" of the situation, and clarity of vision has never been more vital. Going forward, the question is how to convey a plan of action that fosters "buy in" and shared vision.

Communication. Effective communication does not always happen vicariously; it involves participation, cooperation, and purposeful intent. As a result of the muddy waters caused by COVID-19, faculty, staff, and students want to know that they are receiving real-time information; thus, communication must be open, honest, and reciprocal. In their book, *Leadership in Higher Education*, Kouzes and Posner (2019) write, "reciprocity turns out to be the most successful approach for such daily decisions because it demonstrates both a willingness to be cooperative and an unwillingness to be taken advantage of."

Shared Governance. During this era of chaos, institutional leadership must include all its constituents to amass collective solutions. Leaders must actively seek the input of everyone affected by the pandemic, remaining open-minded, accepting all constructive feedback, and recognizing that conventional methods of problem-solving can and will be challenged. The goal is to remain receptive, and at times, even vulnerable when seeking change. Everyone wants to feel like their input matters!

Clarity of Vision. Clarity of vision involves knowing and believing in yourself and trusting the process you have developed for change. However, for institutional change to occur, you must inspire others! Building meaningful and respectful relationships will create trust from others and once trust is established, your team will begin to share your vision and join the efforts of confronting the obstacles created by this pandemic.

Reference: Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2019). *Leadership in higher education: Practices that make a difference*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



Ted Robles, LMSW, serves as a Mental Health/Social Work assistant professor at McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas. His passion is advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and bringing awareness to marginalized populations, specifically POC. Ted was a NISOD award recipient in 2017. He earned his MSW from the University of Texas at Arlington and is currently enrolled in the Ferris State University DCCL program, Texas Cohort 2.

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Community colleges are widely recognized as vibrant, constantly changing, and critically important institutions. The effective leadership of such dynamic institutions has long required a clarity of vision, but perhaps never more so than today when we are learning that vision is especially urgent during a global crisis as systematic as the current COVID-19 pandemic. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can leaders best clarify and communicate their objectives and inspire others to a shared vision while the pandemic continues to create havoc?

Critical Leadership Skills in Uncertain Times

Cheryl M. Hagen, EdD

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Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer, Retired
Schoolcraft College, Michigan

During the nonstop cycle of “breaking news” throughout the late fall/early winter of 2020, one news commentator stated the stunningly obvious: “It turns out, leadership really does matter.” The various crises of the past year have brought leaders at all levels into sharp focus, and we as a nation witnessed leadership successes and failures in national, state, and local concerns. Astute observers of the dynamics of leadership during a crisis, those who have seen the sometimes swift and bitter consequences of faulty decision-making, and leaders who may question how to maintain a vision during uncertain times are well aware that there is much to be learned from what we have been through.

Those of us in leadership roles last spring faced the challenge of the pandemic with the sobering realization that we had no clear guidelines, no certainty, and no sense of safety. Messages from the CDC and state and federal leaders were constantly changing, and even those in authority found themselves shrugging their shoulders and hoping for the best. As one of my colleagues observed apologetically, “This is my first pandemic.”

Nevertheless, remaining focused on a leader’s vision during this time was not only possible but critical. As every leader intrinsically knows, a vision can only be realized if there are people who share that vision and work to bring it to fruition. The qualities and characteristics that are essential for good leadership gain heightened importance during times of crisis. Leaders can only realize their vision if their people know that the leader cares about them, listens to them, and communicates with them. The leader must inspire trust.

Almost all community college leaders would likely have a vision that includes caring about students. But does that vision include caring about the people who serve the students? How is that caring demonstrated? Before state mandates closed campuses in some states, many faculty and staff were encouraged or enabled to work from home, clearly showing that their safety and wellbeing was a priority. In response, countless faculty and staff were flexible and creative, bringing their best efforts to benefit students.

When classes shifted abruptly from on-ground to online last spring, the transition required enormous effort on the part of many. The logistics were truly daunting, and the amount of detail and unforeseen issues made even the best plans subject to change. Because of an unwavering vision of providing quality service to students, our team set the goal of reaching out to every single student affected by this transition. The message carried to the students was not just academic but supportive. And students responded. We had an opportunity to resolve problems, connect students with assistance, and offer both sympathy and empathy. We also became aware of unanticipated problems, with an opportunity to provide solutions. The staff who made the calls were mostly volunteers. These volunteers knew that the college cared about them and supported them, so they were able to offer genuine help to students.

A laser-focused visionary leader must also be willing to listen authentically to feedback, questions, criticism, and alternate viewpoints. The key word in the previous sentence is authentically. It is not enough to pay lip service to wanting to hear from people, nor is it sufficient to conduct surveys that will be summarily disregarded.

During a crisis, there is not always time to move methodically and intentionally toward a decision. If there is a genuine opportunity before a decision is made to gather opinions, thoughts, and concerns that will then be weighed carefully, by all means the leader should say so. If, however, the decision has been made and input is neither encouraged nor welcomed, that should be communicated (as diplomatically as possible) as well, along with the reasons why the call had to be made the way it was. Acceptance of the decision in these circumstances will depend on the trustworthiness of the leader.

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This, of course, speaks to the leaders’ ability to communicate. Although many higher education organizations have sophisticated and highly reliable grapevines, communications directly from the leaders, in their own voices, are critical. Savvy leaders are well aware that when there is a vacuum, rumors and innuendo will fill it. Complaints that “nobody knows what’s going on” take up everyone’s time and energy, and rumor control takes a toll as well. Far better to overcommunicate during these times. During the early days of the pandemic, some community college presidents sent out daily email bulletins; others chose to record video messages, posted on the website and accessible to faculty, staff, and students. The positive impact is obvious: Everyone feels informed, and the fact that leadership is making an effort to keep everyone safe and informed also communicates a message of caring.

At its foundation, the ability to carry out a clear vision during times of uncertainty or crisis depends on the integrity, compassion, and authenticity of a trustworthy leader. During difficult times, the best leaders can continue to move an organization forward if they have invested in relationships among faculty and staff and can demonstrate enhanced caring and communication skills throughout the challenge.

Dr. Cheryl M. Hagen is an adjunct faculty member in the Ferris State University DCCL program and a proud graduate of Cohort 5. She is also a contributor and member of the editorial board of the forthcoming book, “Enhancing Performance: A Best Practices Guide for Innovations in Community Colleges.” Dr. Hagen recently retired from her position as Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan. Throughout her career in higher education, Dr. Hagen focused on improving the student experience from first contact through graduation. She has extensive experience with leadership during changing times, strategic enrollment management, and creating a safe, equitable, and encouraging campus climate. Dr. Hagen has served in leadership roles at a small, private college, a state university, and at a large community college. She is a licensed professional counselor in the State of Michigan.



QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

Leaders, Do You Have a Clear Vision for the Post-Crisis Future?

by Mark W. Johnson
and Josh Suskewicz

Due to the immense global upheaval and organizational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders are scrambling to manage the immediate fallout. However, the authors point out that it's also critical to prepare for whatever comes next. They offer a number of practical suggestions for exploring and envisioning the future of the organization and rallying the team once the immediate crisis ends. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/3bEB3H5>

Why Leaders Get Blindsided and What To Do About It

by Constance Dierickx

The author points out that the global pandemic has brought with it extreme turbulence, causing institutions to face unpredictable and previously unimagined challenges. As a result, many leaders are growing stressed out and weary due to the pressure of this ongoing crisis. Three recommendations are presented to help leaders make an intentional effort to manage themselves effectively during these trying times. Access this work here: <https://bit.ly/38xzlF2>

Leadership Requires Clarity of Vision *(continued from page 1)*

hypotheses, propositions, arguments, hopes, and dreams—core concepts around which they organize their aspirations and actions. Leaders often begin the process of envisioning the future by discovering their themes. Everything else leaders say about their vision is an elaboration, interpretation, and variation on that theme. Fortunately, there are ways to improve your ability to articulate your themes, and ultimately your visions, of the future.

Finding your vision is a process of self-exploration and self-creation. It's an intuitive, emotional process. There's often no logic to it. What we've seen is that exemplary leaders have a passion for their departments, their causes, their programs, their students, their subject matter, their technologies, their communities—something other than their own fame and fortune. Leaders care about something much bigger than themselves and much bigger than us all.

Explore Your Past. As contradictory as it might seem, in aiming for the future you need to look back into your past. Looking backward can actually enable you to see farther than if you only stare straight ahead. Understanding your personal history can help you identify themes, patterns, and beliefs that both underscore why you care about particular issues or circumstances now and explain why making them better in the future is such a high priority.

*Leaders care about something
much bigger than themselves and
much bigger than all of us.*

When you gaze first into your past, you elongate your future. You also enrich your future and give it detail as you recall the richness of your past experiences. So, to be able to envision the possibilities in the distant future, look first into the past. When you do, you're likely to find that your central theme has been there for a long time.

Another benefit to looking back before looking ahead: you can gain a greater appreciation for how long it can take to fulfill aspirations. You also realize that there are many, many avenues that can be pursued and that there may actually be no specific end in sight when it comes to your visions.

None of this is to say that the past is your future. Adopting that extremely dangerous perspective would be like trying to drive to the future while looking only in the rearview mirror. With that point of view, you'd drive you and your department or program right off a cliff. As you broaden your experiences and expand your network of connections, your time horizons will also stretch forward.

Immerse Yourself. As you acquire experience, you naturally acquire information about what happens, how things happen, and who makes things happen. When you're presented with an unfamiliar problem, you consciously (or unconsciously) draw upon your experiences to help solve it. You select crucial information, make relevant comparisons, and integrate lessons you've learned with the current situation.

For the experienced leader, all of this may happen in a matter of seconds. But it's the years of direct contact with a variety of problems and situations that equip the leader with unique insight; listening, reading, feeling, and sensing—these experiences improve the leader's vision. Leaders develop an intuitive sense or gut feel for what is

going to happen down the road—they can anticipate the future.

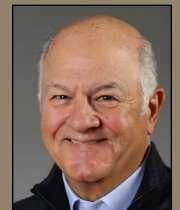
*By highlighting critical lessons from
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highways still to be explored.*

By highlighting critical lessons from the past, you are able to generate insightful roadmaps for leadership highways still to be explored. It's the knowledge gained from direct experience and active searching that, once stored in the subconscious, becomes the basis for leaders' intuition, insight, and vision.

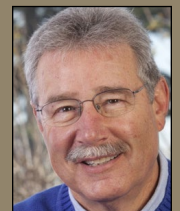
Envisioning the future is a process that begins with a feeling or an inspiration that something is worth doing. Your vision of the future may be fuzzy, but at least you're focused on a meaningful theme. You believe that the present situation could be better than it is today; you act on your instincts, and the vision gets a little clearer. You do something else that moves you forward; the vision gets a little clearer still. You pay attention to it, experience it, immerse yourself in it. Get the process started and, over time, you see more detail in your dream. It's an iterative process, one that eventually results in something that you can actually articulate, propelling yourself and others to places you have never been before.

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Jim Kouzes is the coauthor of the award-winning and best-selling book, *The Leadership Challenge*. He also currently serves as a Fellow with the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University. Jim has co-authored over a dozen books, as well as the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)—the top-selling off-the-shelf leadership assessment in the world. The Wall Street Journal named Jim one of the ten best executive educators in the U.S., and he received the Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance Award from the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), as well as the Thought Leader Award by the Instructional Systems Association. Jim has also been recognized as one of HR Magazine's Top 20 Most Influential International Thinkers, and as one of the Top 100 Thought Leaders in Trustworthy Business Behavior by Trust Across America.



Barry Posner is the co-author of the award-winning and best-selling leadership book, *The Leadership Challenge*, and *The Leadership Practices Inventory*, called "the most reliable, up-to-date leadership instrument available today." Dr. Posner is Professor of Leadership at the Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University, where he served for 12 years as Dean of the School and received the President's Distinguished Faculty Award and the School's Extraordinary Faculty Award. He, along with Jim Kouzes, received the ASTD's highest award for their "Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance." The International Management Council named them as the nation's top management and leadership educators, and he was recently recognized as one of the Top 50 Leadership Coaches in America. Dr. Posner is an internationally renowned scholar who has published several award-winning books on leadership and more than 85 research and practitioner-oriented articles.



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