

# Paving the Way for Change: Visionary Leadership in Action at the Middle Level

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*This qualitative case study explored visionary leadership in action by focusing on the strategies that some middle school principals use before implementing schoolwide reforms. Ninety-eight middle level principals were surveyed and 44 were interviewed. Findings indicate that visionary leadership in action involves an initial exploration of possible change areas; discussions and education regarding the issues involved; and support, commitment, and ownership. In addition, time, the courage to change, a plan to involve all, and openness and appreciation to explore thoroughly are required characteristics of the visionary middle level principal who desires to successfully implement reform.*

Visionary leadership refers to the capacity to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that clarifies the current situation and induces commitment to an even better future. Colton (1985) described a visionary leader as one who “established goals and objectives for individual and group action, which define not what we are but rather what we seek to be or do” (p. 33). The visionary leader inspires, challenges, guides, and empowers. This articulated link between dreams and action, between vision and leadership, is well documented in the literature. For example, in 1985, Bennis and Nanus claimed that a compelling vision is key to effective leadership in excellent organizations. In 1990, Clark and Clark noted that the key to successful implementation “lies within the principal and his/her ability to provide visionary leadership” (p. 19). Starratt (1995) added that vision is key: “Vision is a dynamic source of leadership that imbues other aspects of leadership with a special energy and significance” (p. 13). In 2002, Fullan stated, “Effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform” (p. 16).

However, according to the middle school principals interviewed and surveyed for this study, holding the “keys” to visionary leadership is not enough. Visionary leaders must actively work to realize their goals and

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objectives. In short, visionary leadership must be transformed into “actions.” This process requires middle school principals to simultaneously look both inwardly and outwardly. They understand that planning the future begins and ends with a vision and that the process of creating a shared vision must precede any decisions for change and/or implementation. But, more importantly, they also understand their school—the nature, needs, strengths, and limitations of their staff members, and what it is going to take to achieve the desired result. The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies that some middle school principals utilize before implementing reform initiatives and to look at what middle school principals do in the process of putting visionary leadership into practice.

## Review of Literature

Visionary leadership became a popular term used to characterize school principals in the 1980s. In addition to functioning as instructional leaders, problem solvers, resource providers, and a myriad of other roles, principals are expected to cultivate and communicate a “vision” to teachers, students, and the community. Discussing this vision Bredeson (1985) wrote:

Broadly conceived, vision is the principal’s ability to holistically view the present, to reinterpret the mission of the school to all its constituents, and to use imagination and perceptual skills to think beyond accepted notions of what is practical and what is of immediate application in present situations to speculative ideas and to, preferably, possible futures (pp. 43–44).

In 1987, Greenfield linked vision and imagination. He suggested that “vision...results from the exercise of moral imagination” (p. 62). Elaborating, he noted:

Moral imagination refers to the inclination of a person to see that the world, in this case the school and the associated activities and learning, need not remain as it is—that it is possible for it to be otherwise, and to be better.... It is the ability to see how things are and how they might be—not in terms of the ideal, but in terms of what is possible, given a particular school situation (p. 61).

Barth (1987) also stressed the importance of vision in education. He argued that visions should be honored for three compelling reasons: (a) these are the only prescriptions for school reform that have a prayer of being taken seriously and sustained, (b) these rich insights have been hammered out of years of practice, and (c) the excitement of working in schools...come(s) from studying a difficult situation and then generating one’s own plan [or vision] for improving things (pp. 256–257).

Murphy (1990) provided some insights into the nature of visionary leadership. He concluded, “more effective principals have a clear sense of direction for their schools that they are able to clearly articulate” (p. 167). In addition, these principals translate this sense of direction into specific, ambitious learning goals (Rosenholtz, 1985) that tend to be student centered (Wimpelberg, 1986), and stress student achievement (Brookover & Lezotte, 1977). Finally, the visionary leader focuses on fewer coordinated objectives around which staff members’ energy can be mobilized (Murphy, 1990).

## Method

The data used in this exploratory, qualitative case study are part of a larger database that was developed over a period of 2 years. It is important to note that the theme presented in this article is one of seven that were developed from an analysis of the database (see Brown & Anfara, 2002). Surveys and semistructured interviews were the primary methods of collecting data. Initially, surveys were sent to 175 middle level principals in the states of New Jersey, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania (convenience sampling of states and principals). Ninety-eight surveys (56%) were returned useable for data analysis (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for summary statistics on the principals and the schools). Survey questions related to the principals’ (a) educational, professional, and personal background; (b) knowledge of the middle school concept; (c) experience with and perceptions of school reform and change; (d) attitudes toward parent involvement in school; and (e) knowledge of special education issues.

From the pool of survey respondents, 44 principals indicated that they were willing to be interviewed. These in-depth, semistructured interviews allowed the middle level principals to expand their survey responses, discuss more freely what it means to be a middle level principal, and explain their understanding of visionary leadership in action. Interview questions focused on the following areas: (a) the principal’s experiences with implementing reform in the school, (b) perceptions regarding the effect of the school’s culture and climate on the change process, (c) experiences with successful and unsuccessful reform initiatives, (d) support from the school district in the process of reforming, (e) strategies used to bring about change, and (f) experience with reforms that have been bureaucratically imposed.

While conducting the interviews, the researchers attempted to follow the dictates of phenomenological interviews, “to let them [middle level principals] tell us what we need to know rather than to ask them what we think, a priori, we would like to know” (Pollio, 1991, p. 4). The interviews with each principal lasted approximately one hour. It is important to note that the participants were neither chosen for their effectiveness as middle level principals

**Figure 1. Portrait of Participating Middle Level Principals (n = 98)**

Variable	Type and number of response
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White 76 (78%)</li> <li>• Black 9 (9%)</li> <li>• Hispanic 1 (1%)</li> <li>• Not reported 12 (12%)</li> </ul>
<b>Gender</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male 76 (78%)</li> <li>• Female 22 (22%)</li> </ul>
<b>Age</b>	Range = 28 to 65 years Mean = 48 years
<b>Highest degree</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MA/MS 31 (39%)</li> <li>• M Ed 27 (34%)</li> <li>• EdD 18 (23%)</li> <li>• PhD 3 (3%)</li> <li>• BS Ed 1 (1%)</li> </ul>
<b>Year of degree</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1960s 3 (3%)</li> <li>• 1970s 36 (37%)</li> <li>• 1980s 42 (43%)</li> <li>• 1990s 17 (17%)</li> </ul>
<b>Certification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary 59 60%</li> <li>• K-12 14 14%</li> <li>• Elementary 25 26%</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching experience</b>	Range = 2.5 to 25 years Mean = 13 years
<b>Prior administrative Experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assistant principal 68 (70%)</li> <li>• Administrative experience 13 (13%)</li> <li>• Curriculum specialist 8 (8%)</li> <li>• No prior administrative experience 9 (9%)</li> </ul>
<b>Administrative experience in years</b>	Range = 1 to 31 years Mean = 9 years Mode = 1 year (11 respondents)
<b>Tenure for middle school appointment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 to 3 years: 21 (21%)</li> <li>• 4 to 5 years: 45 (45%)</li> <li>• 6 to 10 years: 20 (20%)</li> <li>• 10+ years: 15 (14%)</li> </ul>
<b>Formal middle school training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No 58 (59%)</li> <li>• Yes 40 (41%)</li> </ul>
<b>Membership in professional organizations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NASSP 65 (66%)</li> <li>• ASCD 55 (56%)</li> <li>• NMSA 35 (36%)</li> <li>• STATE MSA 20 (20%)</li> <li>• PDK 18 (18%)</li> </ul>

*Note.* Responses are based on a convenience sampling and do not represent all principals in all states. ASCD = Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development; NMSA = National Middle Level Association; MSA = Middle School Association; PDK = Phi Delta Kappan.

**Figure 2. Portrait of Participating Middle Level Principals (n = 98)**

Variable	Type and number of responses
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suburban 68 (70%)</li><li>• Urban 19 (19%)</li><li>• Rural 11 (11%)</li></ul>
Grade configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 6–8 63 (65%)</li><li>• 5–8 15 (15%)</li><li>• 7–8 9 (9%)</li><li>• 7–9 11 (11%)</li></ul>
School type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public 98 (100%)</li><li>• Private 0 (0%)</li><li>• Other 0 (0%)</li></ul>
Middle school programs implemented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teaming 86 (88%)</li><li>• Interdisciplinary teaching 81 (83%)</li><li>• Transition programs 74 (76%)</li><li>• Exploratory curriculum 72 (73%)</li><li>• Block/flexible scheduling 58 (59%)</li><li>• Advisory 38 (39%)</li></ul>

*Note.* Responses are based on a convenience sampling and do not represent all principals in all states.

nor for their understanding of middle school philosophy. Rather, they met the purposive sampling criteria of being practicing middle school principals.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for purposes of analyzing the participants' understandings and self-reported practices. Therefore, a limitation of this research is that the findings presented in this article reflect the self-perceptions of the middle school principals and not their actual behaviors. Readers will notice a number ranging from 01 to 44 used to identify the source of each verbatim interview account. The appendix contains demographic information on each of these 44 principals that will assist in contextualizing the responses contained in this article.

## Findings

The process of change or reform can be divided into three broad phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. In this article, we focus on the initiation phase. Fullan (1991), drawing on the work of Miles (1986), argued that initiation depends on three Rs: relevance of the improvement innovation in terms of need, quality, practicality, clarity and complexity; readiness of the staff to become involved; and resource and support availability, including time. The middle level principals who participated in this study identified these three components during their interviews, and we refer to them herein as *exploration*, *education*, and *edification*—the three Es.

## Exploration

Recognizing that “there is always a tremendous responsibility in change...a great opportunity to make an enormous difference” (09), visionary middle level leaders willingly accept their role as catalyst and as vision keeper. Even within the context of political pressures (i.e., accountability) and limited resources, as true change agents they understand that the process of revealing the beliefs undergirding a proposed plan helps participants build a high level of commitment to the new effort. According to Fullan (1999), “schools that manage change best are those with a collaborative work culture” (p. 1). The interviewees agree. “You need to be able to work well with people...to accept different ideas. It’s very important to do things collaboratively” (03). It involves an initial exploration of possible change areas, a “thorough examination of all the components that make a good middle school” (04), “careful preparation” (10), and sound rationale. Teachers need “time to just sit and talk...to kick around their ideas...become a group of people working toward the same end” (06).

**Courage to change.** “No single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 157). Given this fact, visionary leaders need courage to take on the role of principal change agent, to set the intellectual and interpersonal tone of the school, and to shape the organizational conditions under which the school community works (Hipp, 1997). “No change is easy and most change is met with some resistance” (20). Even so, effective schools continually evaluate themselves and make improvements. Evaluation begins by involving stakeholders in planning, establishing goals, and specifying measurable outcomes. One practicing middle school principal said it involves, “Constantly doing a needs assessment, a personal needs assessment of what’s wrong. Then setting a goal, prioritizing the goal and coming up with a plan to achieve the goal. Implement the plan involving staff, resources, timeline, etc. Evaluate and ask if the need still exists” (19). In their own words, other middle level principals reflect on the importance of time, communication, openness, and appreciation.

Have to see the world as it is, have the ability to deal with change and utilize the tools that will help you deal with it, understand the diverse cultures and have the courage to deal with problems. When you change a school, you change its culture (19).

Most people are afraid of change but you can really learn from it. I think that our school has learned a lot from the changes we made and I’m proud of that. I complement people on new ideas and am willing to implement them where necessary (26).

There's a real human side to change, too. You have to be really respectful of the culture and the traditions. So, it's a balance of all that. I think the key to visioning is understanding the culture and working to create the culture that you want (11).

**Plan to involve others.** Research has demonstrated that schools that have restructured to function democratically “produce high achievement with more students of all abilities and graduate more of them with better levels of skills and understanding than traditional schools do” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 331). Studies have also shown that “student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative [democratic] work cultures that foster a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continually on improving instructional practices in light of student performance data, and link to standards and staff development” (Fullan, 1998, p. 8). In other words, it appears that “when given support, time, and resources, democracy of, by, and with ‘workers’ works” (Glickman, 1998, p. 80).

Shared decision making, a process of making educational decisions in a collaborative manner at the school level, emphasizes the fact that those closest to the students will make the best decisions about their education. It hinges on the belief that those carrying out decisions should have a voice in determining the vision. The purpose, according to Bauer (1992) and Lange (1993), is to improve school effectiveness and student learning by increasing staff commitment and ensuring that schools are more responsive to the needs of students. Intensive, lasting change will not occur if the school community is opposed, or even if it is indifferent (Balfanz & Mac Iver, 1998). Newmann (1991) suggests that giving teachers more autonomy, discretion, and control in conducting their work will encourage a greater sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, quality in student learning. Although the analysis of the data collected for this study supports these findings, it also highlights the necessity for sensitivity, awareness and administrative balance in overseeing the shared decision-making process.

At an early stage of development, educators are reminded by Stevenson and Erb (1998) that “teacher quality of life influences school climate. Yet as school climate improves, the teacher quality of life gets even better. Positive changes build on each other—creating a mutually supportive momentum for continuing progress” (p. 52). Administrators and teachers alike need to work together in finding that mutually supportive balance, especially with regard to decision-making power. “Wise principals realize that as much as possible, those closest to the teaching/learning situation need to make important judgments pertaining to it and affecting their students and themselves” (Arnold & Stevenson, 1998, p. 40).

However, striking that balance is easier said than done. Exemplary middle schools and their visionary leaders find it essential to involve all stakeholders in the change process. They work diligently at mobilizing a critical mass of school staff members, parents, and others to accept the proposed changes. According to Hatch and Hytter (1997), “involving the public in setting district goals and plans may result in more agreement on education goals than is currently evident, as well as more community ownership of planned reforms” (p. 6). Successful school reform involves a shift from controlling and directing at the top level to guiding and facilitating at all the levels. When conducted collaboratively, the visioning process can contribute to a school culture that demonstrates cooperation, meaningful involvement, and dedication to continuous improvement. *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) calls for empowering teachers to make such decisions and to share the responsibility for school leadership. Visionary leaders at the middle level understand that those who know and work with students daily must be trusted to do what is best for them.

Absolutely, inviting as many people as possible into the decision-making processes. I feel that all of the stakeholders, whether it be the parents, the students, the teachers and the staff have to be involved. They have to have at least an opportunity to contribute in some way. Always be aware of what is happening and why it's happening and how it's going to affect them. I think when they feel part of that then they feel more comfortable with the decisions that are made (29).

You have to have done your homework to know what part of the change you want. You have to know your building and the community to know whether or not they'll accept the change and you have to get people involved in helping you bring about the change. Get people involved in the visioning and give them responsibility (20).

“Attempts to ‘package’ reform initiatives through the programmatic efforts of nationally recognized educators often ignore the spirit of the local; as a result, they may simply impose more demands on teachers and pupils alike, and thereby contribute to their alienation from community” (Foster, cited in Merz & Furman, 1997, p. ix). If the administration exercises too much authority, whether in the interest of time efficiency or out of a need to be in control, group members will have less investment in real change. Unless all of the stakeholders are involved early and often in the initial stages of visioning and planning, implementing reform will become just another authoritarian mandate met with resistance. Indeed, instead of positive

outcomes, negative consequences can actually flourish. If the mode of operation of an organization is too hierarchical, manipulating, and/or threatening, then group members may become overly dependent on the structures and unable to operate without directives. Administrators who are reluctant to loosen the reins and allow teachers to assume more control over the process necessary to remake the educational enterprise will be unsuccessful in their efforts to implement change. It is important to remember that responsibility comes with practice and empowerment.

**Be open to explore.** In addition to courage and the foresight to involve all stakeholders, visionary leadership in action requires a desire to delve deeply and an openness to explore thoroughly. As Fullan and Miles (1992) explained, “change goes best when it is carried out by a cross-role group.... In such a group, different worlds collide, more learning occurs, and change is realistically managed” (p. 247). One participant’s way of ensuring that all relevant groups understand the work under way and their part in making it successful is called the “huddle.” “Every Tuesday my staff and I come together and we share the agenda making and facilitating. What’s the game plan for the week? What’s going well and what hasn’t? We discuss problems, where we’ve been, where we’re going and plans to get there” (18).

A visionary leader must be a “reflective practitioner” who carefully considers how actions are implemented and what the resulting effects are (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 67). Educators must accept moral responsibility for educating young adolescent middle level students, have sufficient autonomy and resources to encourage educational entrepreneurship in the development of new programs, and possess a deep commitment to such reform efforts in their schools. When they work together to govern the school and make critical decisions about curriculum and school policy, a climate of innovation and experimentation is common, and a feeling of empowerment and growth is nurtured. “A cooperative learning community means a more comfortable and inspiring work environment for teachers as well as students” (Graves, 1992, p. 62).

It’s important to be open to trying things in a different way...changing the plan if it’s not working and being able to take a risk...willingness to make accommodations and adaptations, to get out of the box...looking at a problem from more than one point of view (06).

Creating a vision involves assessment so that you’re building change around some kind of perceived needs and data. I think change should always be goal oriented and it should involve the stakeholders. It should be slow and steady progress that lasts longer than knee jerk reactions. You need to hear the voices of many (33).

If you're very clear, you're very directed, you don't rush into it, you let the process flow, that helps people to not resist. Look at all the pros and cons of the program, visit, read the literature, go to your staff as much as possible, and know deep down in your heart that it's the best thing for the kids (13).

## *Education*

Discussions and education regarding the issues involved need to follow and expand on the initial exploration stage. Visionary leaders at the middle level share a passion for continuous improvement and growth, work diligently at laying a foundation for change, fully investigate the rationale underpinning reform, and dialogue passionately with a purpose. Their role is to help various stakeholders develop sufficient knowledge about the need for a school-wide improvement process and the nature of the proposed changes so that their constituencies can make informed decisions. While discussing the difficulty of visioning and change, one principal shared the importance of “taking on the philosophy before the practicality of doing it” (07), so as to avoid future “battles.” Another principal advised the following, “Clarifying the objective at the outset minimizes the teachers’ anxiety and resistance” (10).

According to Cuban (1983), transforming typically large, uncompromising school bureaucracies into communities characterized by a context of difference and a commitment of collaboration requires change beyond mere surface restructuring. Such transformation necessitates identifying structural and institutional arrangements vital to promoting ongoing staff development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995) and introducing processes that change existing professional values and norms in ways that support the creation of schoolwide professional communities (Fullan, 1995). Argyris and Schon (1978) believed that these transformative actions require schools to examine basic premises that guide organizational behavior and to continuously increase the existing organizational knowledge base. Murphy (1991) added, “Real educational transformation will require the involvement of all key players, work on all components of the system, and the simultaneous use of four distinct but interrelated restructuring strategies—teacher empowerment, school-based management, choice, and teaching for understanding” (p. 17). Reminded that effective reform initiatives involve a “willingness to put in the time, effort, and energy in terms of planning” (04) principals offer the following advice:

You need to give people exposure to information, present them with ideas and make them part of the ownership. It comes back to collaboration. We bring people in, teacher to teacher, to describe, explain, clarify. It's all about educating before implementing (24).

If you're going to live in the real world, you have to have a central office and a school board that's going to make a commitment to the staff development necessary to make these programs work. To make this concept work, it all goes back to selling the teachers on why you are doing it and then providing the training necessary to do it (04).

If you're going to change the way something is organized, put as much of it out there and up front as you can. Then communicate, communicate, communicate. This way everybody knows what is involved in the vision and there are no surprises (06).

We try to figure out what to do and how to do it. We go to conferences here, there, and everywhere. We get people cranked up, encourage them to take risks. We do this, try that...we allow teachers in the decision-making process as much as possible (11).

### *Edification*

As evidenced throughout the middle school movement, organizational change alone will not dramatically alter the educational experiences of middle grade students (see Roney, Anfara, & Brown, 2002). "Developmental responsiveness carries with it major implications for school restructuring. It demands that middle level educators move beyond the "mere" form of middle level programs, such as interdisciplinary teaming and teacher advisories, and become increasingly concerned with the substance of these programs" (Lounsbury & Clark, 1990, p. 134). Mergendoller (1993) argued that many middle schools have made the recommended structural changes and that they often represent "cosmetic fiddling" (p. 444), failing to result in fundamental changes in the purposes, priorities, and functioning of the school. Authentic visioning is considerably more complex than simply implementing a promising idea for a term or a year and then comparing changes in student achievement or performance in specific areas. Attempting to bring about more positive student outcomes by selecting one or two of the Carnegie recommendations is not nearly as powerful a strategy for change as attempting to implement most or all of the elements. They were envisioned to be interactive. In fact, according to Stevenson and Erb (1998), "manipulation of one or even a few variables is insufficient to bring about the more expansive re-direction of schooling that *Turning Points* calls for" (p. 50).

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have come together in the movement to reform middle-level schools, but the most difficult task—implementing those reforms—must be in the hands of practitioners who are informed about the important issues in middle level education and about

young adolescent development. They are more likely to make the kind of changes in their schools that will have a major impact on school restructuring (Clark & Clark, 1994).

Invite people into the change. I can't change it; we have to do this collectively. We have to ask what makes sense for Tommy...bringing them back to purpose, back to the vision...lots of dialogue with lots of people...building trust, being consistent, working hard, building respect (09).

Well, any changes that I need to have happen or take place among the staff have to be aligned with the school's mission and vision first. So I have to find a way every time, depending on what it is, to let the staff buy into it. Sometimes it can be informal conversations with the folks that you know are the leaders. They come up with the ideas themselves and run with that thought. Sometimes you have to talk to your most negative people first and get that out of the way. It depends on what the issue is or what the change is but universally speaking the staff has to buy into it before any change can exist. You might as well be talking to the brick wall if you don't have the staff buy into it (32).

**Provide support.** Middle level reform—indeed all school reform—is a developmental process. According to Stevenson and Erb (1998), “it begins by teachers believing in and wanting to change” (p. 52). Exploration is accompanied by education and edification, that is, creating opportunities for change and learning the skills necessary to support it. With a supportive environment and changes in practice, reforms get established. The authors remind educators that “as the reforms are established, they change the way a school works and the way teachers and students experience school. Then, and only then can we expect to see real improvement in student performance and behavior” (p. 52).

Without exception, the respondents of this study were future oriented and expressed hopes, dreams, and goals for the future of their schools. They recognized that change most often must be incremental, and they expressed patience and a willingness to let important changes unfold over time. Above all, visionary leaders in action at the middle level are sensitive and appreciate the need for time, training, trust, and tangible support prior to transformation. “We need time to interact around progress. Teachers need time to reflect. It's a rare individual that will make the transfer without those things” (08). Built through honesty, awareness, support, commitment, and ownership, the process of edification is vital. It involves “bringing significant parties together, making them part of the planning, helping them to be educated

with you, building leadership in everyone, and realizing that we're all partners here" (32). According to Anderman and Urdan (1995), "meaningful leadership is possible only when supported by leadership at the classroom, school, district and state levels" (p. 26). The principals here believe that "If you want a successful school, you can't do it yourself. Look at the strength of your staff, delegate to people, provide support, accept mistakes, and go on" (44). Starratt (1995) reminds educators that "the real source of the leader's power is not in the person or position, it is in the vision that attracts the commitment and enthusiasm of members" (p. 16). Others agree that the point of visionary leadership is to get everyone to join together to pursue a dream, an idea, a value by which they can make a contribution:

You've got to make sure that the teachers are absolutely buying into it. They require coaching. The administration really has to be keyed into it. They require a tremendous amount of support. And so, you need to work very hard (07).

Our school board has been very, very supportive in terms of personnel dollars. They have appropriated funds to go into programs and initiatives that we have decided are important (23).

My approach with teachers is that I respect their talents and that any success that we experience in this school will be directly attributed to their cooperation and talents. I always ask people to be willing to try new ideas and I give them the confidence that they are not going to be penalized if it doesn't work. The goal is always to improve things for students, and if their intentions and my intentions are the same then there is little that we can't accomplish (34).

**Build trust and consensus.** Providing a caring, trusting work environment and ample opportunity for participation and shared decision making are two of the ways that organizations enlist people's commitment and involvement at all levels (Bolman & Deal, 1993). According to one of the principals, "Moral and ethical leadership allows teachers, parents, and kids to trust in the school. They always know there is honesty, integrity, mutual respect, and trust that creates a culture in a school that allows all things to be possible. The culture is characterized by trust and the belief that teachers are respected and have the power to make their own decisions" (33). Even skeptical and unsure teachers will be won over when they realize their views are heard and valued and when they see that they have the power to shape school policies based on what they know and discover to be best for the students (Kilgore, Webb, & the Faculty of Coral Springs Middle School, 1997).

Succinctly stated by one interviewee, “The first piece of this [visioning] is analysis, the second is dialogue and the third is consensus building. What emerges, you hope, is a certain level of consensus on a vision, on what’s doable and what isn’t. People become more comfortable in the decision-making process” (22).

Substantial change requires time and continuity to be more self-aware through reflection, processing, and debriefing. Interactions between people that consist of sustained transactions and that are developed around common goals, joint tasks, important sharing, and meeting one another’s needs on a daily, weekly, or regular basis are all necessary when trying to develop ties of community and the skills needed to work together well. Only when people regularly meet, work, and play together does a deeper connection arise. Time to meet and time to mesh must be adequately provided and sacredly guarded. Visioning is an evolutionary process that just takes time—a fact, warns Arnold and Stevenson (1998), that building administrators need to remember in their hurried world of do-it-now directives from the district office. In the absence of such factors, reform cannot be created, mandated, or even declared into existence. Evidenced by the participants’ comments, imposing conformity tends to breed resistance.

All changes have to be agreed upon by the teachers to the extent possible. Form committees, put ideas on paper, get staff to agree on it—consensus-building model (21).

Visioning requires a conversation. Typically I go to the stakeholders and invite them into a conversation because change is an evolution, not a revolution. You need to be sensitive and invite those who are going to be part of the change, whether it’s going to affect them or they’re going to be responsible for implementing it. So I seek the thinking of others and balance it with what I am attempting to try (25).

Many administrators go to outside people to fix their problems. I don’t do that. My faculty has trust in what I bring to them. They resist some things but we discuss things and they tend to trust. They have an open forum, there is a give and take regarding change (31).

First thing you have to do is establish a relationship of trust with the people. Get their input into the change, what are the effects, what they think, if you can try to pilot it and then evaluate and then implement (35).

## Summary

Within the context of schools, predicting the future is a hazardous business. But as long as educators aspire to some control over their own destiny, they have to continuously give it their best shot. Some aspects of educators' and administrators' lives, in any event, can be shaped significantly by their aspirations, and the nature of schools is among them. No matter what type of organization (e.g., Morgan, 1986) or conception of leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985), a vision of what the organization ought to be seems vital to success, especially during turbulent times. More now than ever before, the school principal is being looked to for the successful implementation of school reforms that lead to improved student academic performance.

The visionary leader is not a mystical person somehow connected to intelligences or powers beyond what others know. The visionary leader is one who can clearly articulate what is and what ought to be. But the person who can only articulate a set of descriptors of what ought to be is like the person who accurately predicts rain but cannot envision the need to build an ark. The visionary leader in action has the necessary skills and knowledge to build a new reality. According to the middle school principals who participated in this study, the following skills and knowledge are needed to transform a vision into reality—to “build that ark:”

1. Understand the nature, needs, strengths, and limitations of staff members.
2. Understand the relevance of the reform in terms of need, practicality, and complexity.
3. Assess the readiness of staff to become involved.
4. Ensure that the necessary resources and support are available, including the time to accomplish the task.
5. Work collaboratively with a critical mass of diverse constituents (teachers, community members, parents, etc.).
6. Understand that change is difficult and will be met with resistance.
7. Acknowledge that teachers must “own” the intended reform.
8. Ensure that excessive authority is not imposed from above.
9. Provide the professional development and education necessary to properly implement the intended reform.
10. Remember that structural changes will not ensure fundamental changes in the purposes, priorities, and functioning of a school by themselves.
11. Acknowledge that reform is a developmental process. ☘

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# Appendix

**Table 1. Identification of Middle Level Principals**

Participant number	Race	Gender	Age	Years of admin. exp.	Grades	Location	No. of teachers
1	White	Male	50	17	6, 7, 8	Suburban	80
2	White	Female	54	12	5, 6, 7, 8	Rural	35
3	White	Male	45	13	7, 8	Rural	25
4	Black	Male	49	9	6, 7, 8	Urban	50
5	White	Male	48	1	6, 7, 8	Urban	45
6	White	Female	48	3	6, 7, 8	Urban	65
7	White	Male	46	5	7, 8	Suburban	60
8	Black	Female	47	1	6, 7, 8	Suburban	60
9	Black	Female	50	5	6, 7, 8	Suburban	80
10	White	Male	58	18	7, 8	Suburban	60
11	White	Female	35	4	6, 7, 8	Suburban	50
12	White	Male	41	5	7, 8, 9	Suburban	75
13	White	Male	62	28	6, 7, 8	Suburban	60
14	White	Male	56	6	6, 7, 8, 9	Suburban	90
15	White	Male	51	3	7, 8, 9	Suburban	60
16	White	Male	54	20	6, 7, 8, 9	Suburban	55
17	White	Female	44	3	6, 7, 8	Urban	55
18	White	Female	56	13	5, 6, 7, 8	Urban	85
19	White	Female	55	21	5,6,7,8	Urban	45
20	White	Male	51	17	6, 7, 8	Urban	27
21	Black	Female	56	4	6, 7, 8	Urban	37
22	White	Male	49	19	7, 8, 9	Suburban	68
23	White	Male	63	33	6, 7, 8	Suburban	60
24	White	Male	42	16	7, 8	Suburban	61
25	White	Male	52	4	7, 8, 9	Suburban	83
26	White	Male	48	8	6, 7, 8	Suburban	60
27	White	Female	52	9	6, 7, 8	Urban	57
28	Black	Male	48	7	6, 7, 8, 9	Suburban	56
29	White	Male	47	16	6, 7, 8, 9	Suburban	51
30	White	Male	57	21	6, 7, 8, 9	Suburban	86
31	Black	Male	59	19	6, 7, 8	Suburban	42
32	White	Female	52	11	6, 7, 8	Suburban	44
33	White	Male	48	20	6,7,8	Suburban	51
34	White	Male	50	20	7, 8, 9	Suburban	135
35	White	Male	54	26	5, 6, 7, 8	Suburban	140
36	White	Male	45	16	6, 7, 8	Suburban	75
37	Black	Male	27	2	5, 6, 7, 8	Rural	43
38	Black	Female	45	7	6, 7	Urban	30
39	White	Male	51	12	6, 7,8	Suburban	70
40	White	Male	32	2	K-8	Rural	13
41	White	Male	51	18	6, 7, 8	Rural	42
42	White	Female	50	24	6, 7, 8	Rural	25
43	White	Male	44	13	K-8	Rural	25
44	White	Male	32	2	6, 7, 8	Rural	75