FOREWORD

The idea that organizations should have a sense of their direction is a relatively new concept. Most large organizations have been concerned historically with maintenance and stability, not with adaptation or direction. Organizational structure in the twentieth century has evolved with the goal of creating stability and predictability of function. Mission-focused, change-driven organizations have always been the exception.

All this has changed in the last two decades of the twentieth century. All organizations, public and private, are being challenged to focus on products or results. To do so requires a keen awareness of the environment surrounding the organization coupled with an internal cohesion that allows all the units and individuals within the organization to function in a concerted effort toward specified ends.

Educators particularly need what Larry Lashway offers in this book since schools are among the least able to adapt to this challenge. Their organizational structure emphasizes decision-making in isolation in an environment where the output measures are unclear, supervision is minimal, and links with the external world are often weak to nonexistent.

In such an organizational context, the most well-meaning of employees has to rely on his or her individual sense of right and wrong, and of organizational priorities. Compliance with those priorities is essentially voluntary; reward for compliance or accountability for noncompliance is minimal. How can change occur within such a structure? How can improvement be realized, quality increased, service improved, client needs better met?

The stakes of not addressing this challenge are increasing for educational leaders who are being held more accountable for systematic improvement of schooling. Administrators are expected to generate improvement in a system that is decentralized and where authority is diffuse. In spite of these constraints, there are administrators who have been and continue to be successful in bringing about change.

The research on effective schools over twenty years, for example, contains some consistent findings. One is the importance of a clear focus on academic learning by the school and a high acceptance of personal responsibility for student learning by teachers. Such schools see higher student achievement. But such schools do not necessarily have authoritarian administrative structures. How do administrators garner focus and concerted effort without resorting to dictates?

This book suggests one powerful tool: the creation of common agreement on and understanding of organizational purposes and direction, what has come to be known as an organizational vision. Lashway engages in an extended and comprehensive analysis of the concept of vision, an analysis that helps the reader understand the complexity of this term and the varying responses it evokes.

The term *vision* is deeply rooted in human culture and has many meanings, from clinical to mystical. For this reason it is an evocative concept, one that can inspire but also create anxiety. Some leaders emphasize the clinical dimension, the capability to design a rational planning process rooted in common understanding, while others seize upon the semispiritual dimensions of visions, those that promote a dedication and belief in the value and correctness of what one is doing.

Schools have struggled to strike a balance, to produce a blending of these differing aspects of vision, and to do so in ways that are consistent with the unique nature of schools as “captive” organizations, ones that cannot define any vision they wish but that are constrained by numerous forces. Lashway demonstrates how administrators have effectively used vision in a wide range of environments.

The process of vision-building was not commonplace in public education much before the late 1980s. Some schools had always possessed strong identities or cultures. But few, if any, had engaged in some systematic reflection or analysis of what they wished to become. Identity often arose from a founder or founders with a strong personal sense of what they wished education to be, or a particularly strong or long-lasting leader who consistently espoused an educational philosophy around which others could align. But these efforts defined the status quo; they did little to set a clear direction for the future, a path of improvement, a set of goals that could serve both to organize and inspire continued and future efforts. Often when the leader left, so did the vision.

Early efforts at vision-building were almost always associated with strategic-planning processes. The tenets of strategic planning, as applied to service organizations, emphasized starting by defining what the organization wished to become, then designing backward from that goal. The vision was the first step in the process. From this starting point, data on current functioning could be analyzed; goals, objectives, and action plans formulated; resources allocated; and efforts evaluated. Given the importance of the vision to the planning process, a great deal of time was often devoted to its creation.

The process of creating a vision required different constituencies, or *stakeholders* in the parlance of strategic planning, to communicate, to understand one another's points of view, aspirations, frustrations. Many of those who engaged in strategic planning described these aspects of vision-building as among the most valuable of the entire planning process. Unfortunately, when the vision was shared with those who had not participated in its creation, something was often lost in the translation. What had appeared so powerful to those who argued over its every word seemed somehow flat or hollow to those who read it from a dispassionate perspective. Vision statements blossomed in schools and administration buildings. But often little else followed or resulted.

The lesson learned is that vision is one dimension of a complex process of both organizational and cultural transformation. While it can be important as stimulus, catalyst, and compass, it needs a series of supports in place to achieve the goal of system improvement.

This book concludes by emphasizing the need to think about schools (and school systems) as learning organizations that continually encourage their members to perceive themselves as participants in a “learning community.” This community becomes ever more adept at meeting client needs, addressing societal expectations, employing data effectively, and utilizing resources efficiently. Schools that can operate in such a fashion will be those that survive and prosper in the twenty-first century. Vision is one important tool to help schools adapt in ways that ensure their continued viability, legitimacy, and value as core institutions in our society.

We can be thankful that this book is much more than another survey of ground now familiar to many school leaders. Readers will be rewarded with an understanding of the visioning process that will help them manage its use in the educational improvement process. Moving from broad overview to very specific recommendations and models, Lashway enables the reader to learn in a few pages lessons that have taken others years to master. A great deal of experimentation has occurred, and this book elegantly captures the most important generalizations and conclusions regarding the effective use and limitations of the visioning process.

In this exceptionally well-written guide, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members will learn how to construct a vision that will energize their schools and inspire everyone to commit their energies to organizational excellence. I hope they will accept Lashway’s invitation to harness the power that a vision for the future supplies for work in the present.

David T. Conley
Associate Professor
College of Education
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon