

Does Change Have To Be Hard?

How to Utilize Opinion Leaders in Successful Communication of Change

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An important leadership challenge directors face is creating and clearly communicating their vision. As part of the strategic planning of a one-year, three-year, or five-year plan for their music program, directors evaluate and diagnose the achievements of the current school year and begin planning ways to improve areas that may have fallen short of their goals; thus, prescribing strategies for further growth may create a need for change in vision casting. Do you ever feel like some changes go smoothly while others create stress and make things harder than they should be? Many valuable visions have failed due to the lack of successful communication.

Directors tend to effectively communicate their vision to students when they get to interact with them daily; however, communicating with a booster organization, with infrequent gatherings, can require different strategies. For instance, one director had an idea and the booster executive board completely bought into the vision, but the program change failed because parents-at-large were not convinced. In short, the need for the change was not communicated thoroughly for parents to understand and more importantly, fully support the changes proposed. Have you experienced a similar situation to this scenario? Using some simple tools, this story will be less likely to happen to you.

When reviewing best selling authors' discussions of vision casting and communication, there are four key elements that are frequently stated in sharing vision to an organization (booster club or music program):

- 1) **crafting** a vision
- 2) **planning**
- 3) **announcing**, and
- 4) **monitoring** community opinion and support of the proposals.

Additionally, to complete the communication loop there must be an element to the communication plan that covers **responding** because the responsibility of clear communication falls on the person sharing the vision or the information (*Alda*). Often times communication fails because nothing happens after step three, the "announcement". If you've had challenges implementing change, reflect on what, if anything, was done regarding the additional elements after step three. There is a strong likelihood that the organization fell short in the vision implementation, monitoring and response because of failure to consider the process involved in the understanding of the message from the musical parent community at-large. Just as a successful master teacher spends a significant amount of effort to evaluate and monitor student's progress, evaluation is critical in the success of vision casting proposals to

bring about successful change. Simply sending an email or a slick graphically-designed flyer does not automatically result in successful communication. In the scenario described above, the director and the parents on the board were already convinced and "received the communication" because of their high level of investment in the organization.

However, the less-engaged parents may not have even read the communication about the vision; therefore, a large gap in the communication loop occurred.

We can create robust response to our initiative implementation by tapping into our opinion leaders. Change is often communicated to and through the officers of the executive team of a booster organization. But to effect change, all influencers need to be harnessed. We know this fact because of the research regarding the Change Theory. The advocates of this theory post that 60% of an organization has to buy in to a change for change to occur. This theory compels us to look beyond our executive committee and utilize the opinion leaders in our organizations. Utilizing these leaders effectively will bring about robust change in an organization. Identifying these leaders is critical and they are often overlooked in a booster organization regarding vision casting

**Dr. Vandewalker
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and affecting change. Typically, opinion leaders are booster members that often have second or third tier positions in the organization or are active only in a serving role or may not be serving at all but other parents view them as “people in the know”. They wait for these parents’ reactions before making their own decisions. These leaders have a huge influence on programs. For successful change to occur, it is imperative to garner support from all opinion leaders.

There are several ways to gather support from these leaders including linking all new decisions, plans, programs to your mission and mission statement. This strategy protects the integrity of the program, undergirds the logic of the vision and reinforces the primary goals of your organization. For instance, if your mission statement includes providing short-term goals for long-term growth in performance achievement, you may want to plan a spring trip performance opportunity. Consider linking that decision to that fact that this trip will allow the organization an opportunity to receive noteworthy national-level evaluation and assessment compared to a local or regional opportunity, as well as providing a short-term goal of aiding and building organizational health, social community and sense of family, soft skill/life skill experiences while celebrating making-music together outside of the daily routine.

Another way to announce your vision is to stress the thinking behind the vision. Allow your team to “get into your head” so they glimpse your heart as well as your thought process. Your entire team will follow your lead when there is little speculation about “why” of your decisions.

Finally, bear in mind that your team will interpret your message. They look at things through the lens of how the idea affects them personally before considering the impact on the organization. Think through your vision regarding outcomes for individuals and your musical organization and offer rationale to meet support for both implications. Key elements of vision implementation are: 1) the ability to visualize how the idea will affect and impact the lives of others, 2) anticipate the variety of responses to the vision and 3) strive for a deep awareness of your opinion leaders. Ask yourself, “Why would I care about this topic or change

if I were an opinion leader? And then communicate those answers. Remembering that people draw a conclusion through three key steps: 1) thinking about the matter, 2) absorbing it, and 3) considering or ruminating upon it (*Clampitt*). Acknowledging these steps can assist in awareness and communication with opinion leaders.

To garner the full support of stakeholders and opinion leaders always remember people respond to new messages in a variety of ways. Some only hear aural messaging others take action through print. Communicate through multiple channels to harness the best response. Then allow time for rumination, discussion, and response. This time of response will allow the opinion leaders to provide positive support to all stakeholders in the communication loop.

So, if you are considering making a large, small, short-term or long-term change in your organization, remember the key elements of vision casting:

- craft a vision
- plan the implementation including identification of opinion leaders
- link new decisions to your mission statement
- stress the thinking behind the decision
- visualize how your team will interpret the suggested changes
- announce the vision
- monitor and evaluate the responses of all the stakeholders noting if the communication loop is complete (sharing the change and stakeholders receiving the information).

Affecting change often feels like a necessary evil; however, change does not have to be hard when incorporating a communication plan that considers the perspectives of all stakeholders and effectively implements a fully communicated vision.

Sources:

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