

Interview with a Visionary Leader

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Table of Contents

Interview with Visionary a Leader ..... 3

    Who is Superintendent John Allison..... 3

    The content of the challenge they faced and the culture of the organization they faced it in..... 3

    Leadership Response to the Challenges in the Organization..... 4

II. The Analysis of Leadership-In-Action..... 5

    Challenging the Process ..... 5

    Inspiring a Shared Vision..... 5

    Enabling Others to Act..... 6

    Modeling the Way..... 6

    Encouraging the Heart ..... 7

III. Summary ..... 8

References..... 9

## I. Interview with a Visionary Leader

### Who is Superintendent John Allison

Organizational Change has always played an important role in successful implementations of new cultural applications. John Allison, the new Superintendent for the Wichita Public Schools is an accomplished leader who has taken on the challenge of establishing a new progressive culture from a stagnant, unfocused academic environment while facing funding shortages in these tough economic times. John's steps in building the vision for the organization to adopt change and move on to the business of education, has been his hallmark throughout his career. John grew up in northeast Kansas, and obtained his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Kansas and received his Master's of Science degree from Emporia State University. He completed doctoral course work in Education Leadership at St. Louis University demonstrating his dedication to learning (USD259, 2011). John began his career as a High school educator where he hone his skill and advancing up the chain with several administrative positions which paved the way for his selection as Superintendent for the Wichita Kansas Public Schools.

### The content of the challenge they faced and the culture of the organization they faced it in

Many of the organizations with in the public school system have cultures that are derived from years of operating without the slightest forethought of how their processes are constructed. There is an inevitable relationship that binds an organization's culture, shared values, and the way its internal structure is shaped with its people. Over the past twenty years the operational and educational components of the district have been independently operated without any intentional communication between the departmental functions even though so many of them

reside under the same leadership chain and some at the same physical location. Plagued by poor performance, weak returns on educational investment, unmotivated and complacent staff was the clear identifier that the Wichita public schools had a dysfunctional culture. John touts his leadership being reinforced in the arena of public education and is accustomed to working with a diverse array of people and skill sets to facilitate a unified organization. To promote learning a new cultural existence requires a spirit of inquiry and openness, patience and building in a tolerance that allows for forgiveness to move staff forward (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). This mind set enabled him to come into the fray with a clean perspective to evaluate the functionality of the complete operation and make a determination on how to address the inefficiencies, a complacent workforce and a non-existent intentional culture induced by years of the lack of a clear collective vision to sustain a viable culture of learning.

#### Leadership Response to the Challenges in the Organization

John arrived to the Wichita district in the midst of an economic downturn and face with a complacent workforce that needed a chance to vest into a new vision. John path to realizing his vision started with learning the history of his new family, examining the current culture, organization and community so that he can adequately assess and understand pertinent issues that profoundly influence the district's functionality. The education service component of the school system is a dysfunctional product of traditions and learned practices, which fails when it comes to values, legacies, fundamental virtues and maintaining logical norms. With the introduction of John Allison, the district has had an impacting change in their leadership mentality. The days of the “Good-ole-Boy” and clique-ish power-brokering has been replaced with a progressive thinking leader with character from the educational realm that places the

importance of leadership in trusting his people. Leaders know that to create a climate of collaboration they need to include the group's needs to get the work done and build the team from a common purpose and mutual respect (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

## II. The Analysis of Leadership-In-Action

### Challenging the Process

John's initial assessment of the Wichita public school employees revealed that there were multiple cultures existing at the same time within the collective that was satisfied with mediocre work performance, acceptance of failing student score on state assessments, and complacent leadership whose impact could be seen in unmotivated staff members. His challenge was to find a way to unify all of the diverse components of the organization into what he called an intentional culture through a shared vision. He is creating an internal (vertical and horizontal) and external operating communication loops, Eliminate walls between domains, and implement leadership professional development to sustain cultural gains. Once this happens the entities will work together as a single cohesive collective. By recognizing and closing the gaps in trust that exist between the organizational components John will be able to develop the foundation on which his staff will have a reason to work together towards a shared vision.

### Inspiring a Shared Vision

John describes how he is building a shared vision that provides a useful framework for his team members to develop and reflect on a coherent, collective set of conceptualizations, values, and goals for the continued progression for a productive future for the organization. By creating a climate that provides opportunity for each team member to articulate and form

optimisms and expectations for various projects. His shared vision of team helps build a culture that places value on the participation of all of its members, regardless of their diverse identity, skill, or background.

“Leaders passionately believe that they can make a difference. They envision the future, creating an ideal and unique image of what the organization can become. Through their magnetism and quiet persuasion, leaders enlist others in their dreams. They breathe life into their visions and get people to see exciting possibilities for the future.”

(Masterfacilitator, nd).

### Enabling Others to Act

When talking with John about empowering people to act, he explained that developing trust is part of changing the organizational culture and the alignment of collective methodologies. This can be accomplished by ensuring the leadership construct and application processes within the Wichita Public School staff are aligned with creditability as a baseline with integrity, intent, competencies, and results combined with the behavioral aspect that will yield a new intentional culture. Using trust as the approach to reaching a shared vision, we encourage our people to develop creative problem solving challenges by looking at what they have in their leadership arsenal rather than focusing on the things that they do not have. By empowering individuals and groups we are able to see the possibilities of resourceful ingenuity in action rather than the insurmountable barriers or what we deem simply as unsolvable problems, solved.

### Modeling the Way

When posed the question on modeling the way for his people, John said: “Actions speak louder than words” (Martinez, 2012). This was a simple declaration that gets right to the core of his leadership philosophy; leading by example. Team members are able to take their lead organically from the daily actions of their leaders. With all learned behavior being equal, actions often outweigh the communicated words of leaders especially when they are inconsistent. For a leader to be an example to their team they have to clearly understand their own values and beliefs before anyone else can vest in them. Leaders create principled environments that are founded on the way people in the organization are treated and the rules of engagement on how goals are reached (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). These leaders also create standards of excellence and then set an example based on character for others to follow. This confirms and reflects on the leader's character. Character is built on attitudes, values, and beliefs. The organizational tone is seen in the undercurrent of the team's culture and values that are set by the character of the leader and the example they display.

### Encouraging the Heart

Every six out of ten employees believe that their bosses are dishonest in their dealings with team members (Covey, 2006). John believes that a leader must come from a perspective of caring about people and what happens to them. Without a high level of sincere compassion for others, anything he does will not reflect leadership that emanates a unified purpose. John said “How can I expect other people to put trust and faith in their team members if I truly don't” (Martinez, 2012). A leader's heart is the one that bridges the relationship between the leader and the people they work with, through practice the principles of encouraging the heart which they unselfishly share (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). A leadership that is made up of values that

encourage the heart is able to address people who have deeply held values and beliefs, to something beyond the material and contributes to creating meaning in the workplace (Kouzes & Posner, 2003).

### III. Summary

To create a successful organization it has to be designed for continued learning, innovative thinking, and functional change. Learning is fundamental to not only mastering change, but the infrastructure that support that change through trust, empowerment and a positive example. Leaders like John Allison know that to ensure that cultural change is guided in a positive direction and uncertainty is handled by having a viable plan for the future, it cannot be accomplished without leadership in action. With his realistic plan for change, the resources and structure to reinforce it, process uncertainty is reduced and the risk changes his challenges into opportunities. John Allison's efforts to build a solid infrastructure on information garnered from his collective team's learning environment to enhance the experience for the organization as a whole through a shared vision founded on trust. Creating group consensus on core values and using that as the basis for an innovative infrastructure was an important to changing the current mythology to an intentional culture. Educating organizational leaders and the district team members about the meaning of those important values through character and trust will undoubtedly lay the beginning groundwork for changing the culture that John Allison envisions for his people and the learners of the Wichita Public Schools.

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