

Developing a shared leadership vision in a college setting

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ABSTRACT

The University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy is nationally recognized for its leadership curriculum. Despite the College's success in developing student leaders, an overall guiding leadership philosophy within the College has not been specifically articulated. To begin the process of developing a shared leadership vision, a democratic, "ground-up" approach to discussing leadership was applied. Over a three-month period, 94 faculty, staff, and graduate students attended eight sessions across two campuses, working together to develop a consensus definition of leadership. The qualitative data from these sessions was forwarded to a College committee, who will lead the next step of incorporating the data into a philosophy statement used in curriculum changes and student development activities.

Keywords: Leadership, Organizational Change, Shared Vision



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INTRODUCTION

The University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy is noted for developing future pharmacy leaders, primarily through the work of the Center for Leading Healthcare Change (CLHC) and the Leadership Emphasis Area (LEA) declaration. The inclusion of leadership components into the curriculum demonstrates that the College values leadership and encourages its focused study. The College's high national ranking (ranked 3rd among more than 120 Schools and Colleges of Pharmacy in the U.S. by U.S. News and World Report) may be influenced by this focus, resulting in a reputation for producing professionals who are well equipped not only to practice as pharmacists, but who are also prepared to respond to current and future health care challenges in innovative ways. These students will shape the delivery of health care in the years to come.

Even though leadership concepts are incorporated into the College's Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm.D.) curriculum, an overall guiding leadership philosophy within the College has not been specifically articulated. Because leadership can be an abstract concept, the College administration wanted to begin the process of articulating a specific leadership philosophy to guide the College. The first part of this process was to gather students, faculty, and staff to discuss existing ideas of leadership and ask two central questions: 1) What do we mean as a College when we talk about leadership? 2) What kinds of leadership experiences do we want to impart to our students? Eventually, this articulated leadership philosophy may become the guiding force, not only for how to teach students, but how to represent the College community. Such a philosophy statement may also be used by the College to inform decisions on curriculum changes and student development activities.

One of the first challenges to creating this cohesive leadership philosophy was to gather ideas from all members of the community. To begin this process, in 2011, the College embarked on the process of collecting the College community's thoughts, ideas, experiences, and perceptions about leadership through a shared vision process. The process chosen to address this challenge defined specific leadership deliverables for all stakeholders – the entire university, students, faculty, staff, and community members. This process involved colleagues and professionals in the scholarly process by documenting what they believed to be the most important leadership principles. Gathering input from these groups helped define a common understanding and shared vision of leadership.

A shared vision is how organizations come together with similar philosophies. As Senge (1990, 1994) describes the shared vision, it is about developing a sense of common identity and practices, which from the College's perspective derives a common understanding of the types of leaders to be developed in the profession. Each department or organizational area within the College completed a set of questions through an exercise during sessions devoted to this purpose, creating a "voice" for the college.

The shared vision, when done in a collaborative process, can help stakeholders engage in the overall organizational vision. Kousez and Posner (1995) describe leadership as "the art of mobilizing others who want to struggle for shared aspirations" (pg. 30). They further continue to describe that a shared vision (2008) must be inspiring to others, full of possibilities. What better way to develop the leadership vision than by those who will have the direct role in educating students? Through a synthesis process in which each faculty and staff participate, the type of student leaders that the university aspires to create can be determined.

The purpose of this article is to document the first part of the process used to help establish a shared vision of leadership that all departments and stakeholders can eventually agree on, embrace, and continually redefine as needed. Each participant in the process had an opportunity to share thoughts and ideas equally amongst colleagues. These thoughts were then captured in an affinity diagram process and further analyzed, as will be described in more detail later in this paper.

ESTABLISHING NEEDS

The research began at the College with a preliminary assessment of perceived leadership needs. Students within the College were interviewed in small groups regarding their thoughts on leadership. These groups defined leadership as: 1) goal and vision focused, 2) changing for better, 3) motivating others and keeping people involved and, 4) service.

The data provided from the needs assessment were brought to the Center for Leading Healthcare Change (CLHC), a group comprised of deans, directors, and leadership-focused faculty. Part of the work of the CLHC is to foster leadership development opportunities for current students, alumni and practicing pharmacists. Therefore, in order to implement the shared vision process across the organization, approval from this influential cohort was instrumental.

The support of the CLHC set the tone for the mission and messages from the Dean of the College. Upon approval of the research by the CLHC, a communication from the Dean was sent to all department heads describing the purpose and emphasizing the Dean's support for the endeavor. This communication introduced the researcher and provided each department head an explanation of purpose, questions clarified, and instructions to schedule a session at an upcoming department meeting. Department heads were also encouraged to contact the researcher in advance to ensure a successful session.

PROCESS OF THE SHARED VISION SESSIONS

Eight shared vision sessions were scheduled – one for each of the faculty and staff departments – between November 2011 and January 2012. The number of attendees per session averaged about 12 (a total number of 55 faculty, 35 staff, and 4 students participated). The structure of these sessions is described below.

Specifically, the following groups were represented at individual meetings: Three members of the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists (AAPS) Student Chapter met on January 12; eighteen members of the College Human Resources/Finance Department met on November 17; nine members of the Professional Education Division met on November 17; two members of the Medicinal Chemistry Department met on January 12; eight members of the Pharmaceutics Department met on January 12; thirteen members of the Experimental and Clinical Pharmacology Department met on November 17; thirteen members of the Pharmaceutical Care and Health Systems Department met on December 1; and twenty-seven members of the Pharmacy Practice/Pharmaceutical Sciences Department (including administration, faculty, staff, and students) met on November 18.

Step 1. Introduce the purpose of the session, and develop common understanding

A handout was provided at the beginning of each session that included a brief outline of the process, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). This helped to ensure all participants understood the process and expectations of the session. The researcher conducting the sessions explained that the ultimate purpose of the shared vision process was to synthesize leadership perspectives across the College, fostering a consistent leadership lexicon and development process for students.

Because the faculty and staff departments within the College encompass a wide variety of disciplines and areas of expertise, participants arrived at the session with many different definitions of leadership. To ensure that all participants started from the same point, a definition of leadership from Lussier and Achua (2007) was used: “Leadership is the influencing process of leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change” (p. 6).

There was a need to emphasize to participants that leadership is a process, as opposed to a position or title. This distinction was important because opening comments offered by faculty and staff in the different groups suggested that some participants understood leadership to refer only to a position of traditional authority. Establishing clarity around this term was a key factor in developing a consistent understanding of expectations and outcomes.

Step 2: Develop shared understanding

As mentioned above, Senge (2004) advocates for “Building Shared Vision” to establish a consistent lexicon and leadership expectations. To establish a shared vision, participants created affinity diagrams in small groups as a part of each session. There are two main reasons for creating affinity diagrams. First, it was vitally important that each faculty member and staff person have a voice in the creation of this shared understanding of leadership. The affinity diagram provides a method by which all members of a group can contribute. Second, the affinity diagram process allows a large amount of information to be collected quickly and efficiently. Having a relatively short amount of time with each group necessitated a process that could be completed quickly.

Affinity diagrams were created by having the small groups respond to several prompting questions that are key to Senge’s model of developing a shared vision:

- What leadership qualities does the current enrolled student population possess?
- What type of leaders do we intend to develop?

The small groups of participants were provided with several pads of sticky notes, a sheet of easel paper, and large markers. The instructions were for each participant to individually provide one idea, thought or concept per sticky note. These notes were part of a specific process (outlined below) to gather information.

1. Participants individually responded to the first question for four to five minutes by writing all thoughts related to the question on the sticky notes.
2. Participants placed each of their sticky notes on the large piece of easel paper.
3. Still in small groups, participants were asked to review each of the sticky notes on the page and rearrange and categorize the concepts.

4. Participants then sorted the groups of notes into categories or themes and labeled them.
5. Finally, the small groups shared each of their themes with the entire group. On average, each group generated three to four themes.

After completing the first question, participants repeated the same process for the second question. Again participants completed individual thoughts on sticky notes and then synthesized common themes with the small group on larger paper.

A third question in Senge's model is, "How do we achieve this change?" This question was not addressed in these initial group sessions because the CLHC wanted to review and advise on the entire process before moving forward.

RESULTS

Upon completion of the initial sessions with the eight groups, data were analyzed with the purpose of identifying major themes that appeared across most, or all, group sessions. This was done by creating a spreadsheet on which each faculty or staff department was listed, along with the themes identified for each of the two questions, "Where Are We?" and "Where Do We Want to Go?"

This spreadsheet was presented to the CLHC, with the department names hidden to increase transparency and objectivity of analysis. The CLHC discussed the findings and engaged in the final part of the shared vision process—reducing the list of departmental themes to three key concepts for developing student leaders:

1. Setting a vision
2. Developing change agents
3. Engaging in effective communication

These key leadership concepts are currently being combined with other data to inform the College's position and action on a number of initiatives, including core curriculum revision, development of elective courses, inter-professional education, and more. Also, the CLHC may also use these data in the future to refine the College's overall leadership vision and student development activities for the College.

FUTURE RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

The University of Minnesota is currently undergoing a comprehensive redesign of its Pharm.D. curriculum. One of the areas of focus in the College is "leadership and engagement." The process described above illustrates how faculty and staff were introduced to a consensus meaning of leadership to incorporate throughout the curriculum. This shared leadership vision will continue to evolve and be measured throughout the curriculum by questioning faculty of their understanding of leadership and assessing students' leadership effectiveness.

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RESOURCES

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

Leadership Philosophy and Competencies Development Plan
University of Minnesota, College of Pharmacy

Leadership Strategy Objective:
Develop the University of Minnesota, College of Pharmacy (CoP) Leadership Philosophy
and Competencies

FACULTY AND STAFF SESSIONS:

LEADERSHIP DEFINITION –“Leadership is the influencing process of leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change” (Lussier & Achua, 2007)

WHY – The purpose of the sessions are to create a synthesis of leadership perspectives across the College of Pharmacy, and a consistency of outcome – how to develop pharmacy leaders.

HOW – Develop a comprehensive synthesis through Peter Senge’s model “Building Shared Vision.” This will be completed through an affinity diagram exercise. Each department or area will complete this Leadership Exercise and a synthesis of all ideas will be combined to create the “voice” of the CoP, Leadership Philosophy and Competencies.

“‘Leader as teacher’ is not about ‘teaching’ people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning, for everyone. Such leaders help people throughout the organization develop systemic understandings. Accepting this responsibility is the antidote to one of the most common downfalls of otherwise gifted teachers – losing their commitment to the truth.” (Senge, 1994)

QUESTIONS EXPLORED DURING SESSIONS

1. What type of leaders are we currently developing?
2. What type of leaders do we intend to develop?
3. What are the skills the leaders need to achieve that outcome?

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