

Interviewing a Strategic Leader

Dannetta B. Sparks

Beulah Heights University

31 March, 2019

Abstract

Successful leaders of the 21st century can create a vision and also translate it into reality. Visionary leadership is transformative and based on the power of inspiration. It is characterized by a commitment to core spiritual values, with a clear vision, respect for empowering relationship, followed by courageous and innovative action. A vision represents an ideal future state and guides organizations toward a higher standard of excellence (Covey, 1991). Strategic processes and approaches drive strategic leadership and encompass the visionary leadership model. This paper aims to provide an understanding of the nature and dimensions of strategic leadership and the visionary leader. The primary purpose of the paper is to examine the personal attributes of strategic leaders and the activities they undertake. The paper provides personal conversations with a visionary leader through the interviewing process. This paper is a narrative qualitative study that examines the journey of Dr. E. Paul Walker. As a visionary leader, Dr. E. Paul Walker, Sr. answers questions concerning building coalitions of staff to create conditions for change and embedding new ways of working. In personal terms, Dr. Walker considers the nature of strategy in its broadest sense and puts forward a model of a sustainable strategically poised organization. This paper argues that to understand the nature and dimensions of strategic leadership and the visionary leader, one has to understand the critical challenges of senior leadership. The move from an operational perspective to a strategic perspective underpins the role of senior leadership. The paper will consider the strategic processes and the strategic approaches that frame the visionary leaders' role, the leadership attributes of strategic leaders, before examining what visionary leaders do.

Keywords: strategic leadership, visionary leader, empowering leadership, strategic processes

Interviewing a Strategic Leader

Olson and Simerson (2015) opine that the strategic leader is the individual who- regardless of role, position, or title- intentionally takes advantage of opportunities to think strategically, influence others toward a chosen course of action, and garner needed buy-in, commitment, and advocacy (p. 52). The similarities between Olson and Simerson's definition of the strategic leader mirror the leadership characteristics of Dr. E. Paul Walker former State Senator of the 43rd District of DeKalb County, former Director of the Children and Youth Council of Georgia, former DeKalb County School Board Member, educator, and community activist.

The general purpose of this study is to add to the growing literature and research in the area of visionary leadership. However, a second purpose of the study is to explore the impact the community may have on the development of visionary leaders. In order to conduct this study, this researcher interviewed Dr. E. Paul Walker. The interviewing determined if he leads in a manner consistent with the literature and research in the area of visionary leadership. Dr. Walker's self-described leadership journey and his success as a visionary leader add to the visionary leadership literature. The primary research method for the study was to interview Dr. Walker using a structured interview method designed to garner information relative to the definition of visionary leadership as outlined by Kotter (2008).

Leadership consistently differentiates the performance of individuals who stand out from their peers and achieve extraordinary results. Likewise, leadership has a greater impact when it is applied strategically- focused on the right priorities and applied in suitable ways (Olson & Simerson, 2015, pp. 211-212). After interviewing Dr. Walker, it became more apparent that implementing the right principles and strategies combined with a clear philosophy of leadership

create an effective leader. Dr. Walker's philosophy of embracing diversity, working together toward common goals and leading by example frame his strategic leadership style

The four types of strategic leadership combine the range of choices a leader faces in a simple, unified framework. As such, it presents four basic options to consider in a given situation, and for each option, it prescribes a particular set of behaviors, considerations, and relevant skills (Olson & Simerson, 2015, p.52). Visionary leadership is an essential option.

Collins' (2002) research revealed that highly successful organizations contain visionary leaders that can articulate a vision which support a core ideology and simultaneously stimulates progress towards a new future. Such visionary leaders are capable of understanding how to preserve an enduring core purpose for an organization and stimulate change at the same time. The challenge of the present educational vortex described above commands a prototype visionary educational leader who is capable of producing a transformational educational change which simultaneously improves core academic student skills and produces 21st- century thinkers and problem solvers.

Kotter (2012) recently published a follow-up work that complements his original publication of *Leading Change*. This work provides a context to utilize a future transformation process occurring at accelerating rates. The author sees the need for change driven by intense competition, increased globalization and the urgency of change. Yukl and Lepsinger (2004) concur with Kotter that quality leaders in these environments can envision a better future for the organization and encourage innovative thinking.

Characteristics of the Visionary Leader

Nanus (1992) opined that "Deciding what is worthwhile or desirable in a vision is also a function of the values of the leader. Core values go a long way in determining what really

matters to an individual or to an organization. One's values influence the questions that are asked about the possible directions that should be pursued. They guide the choice of information being sought to answer these questions and how the information is evaluated. All of this guides the decision as to what vision to pursue among the various possibilities" (p. 35).

The following definitions provide descriptions of Visionary leadership as defined for this study by Olson and Simerson (2015).

1. Visionary leaders are passionate and unrelenting in the pursuit of a particular view of the world. They form their worldview through an acute understanding of the environment and emerging trends, using that understanding to identify existing or emerging problems, and craft novel solutions to those problems that are demonstrably better than existing or possible alternatives (p. 70).
2. Having formed a coherent vision, they drive strategic change through rapid, iterative application of their vision, adapting their vision when confronted with new or changing information, and enrolling others to share and participate in that vision in ways most critical to ensuring its realization (P. 70).
3. Their ability to motivate other stakeholders to support and participate in their worldview contributes greatly to the difference between extraordinary and even average performance (p. 69).

Olson and Simerson theorize that leaders who wish to employ a visionary leadership type must embrace the ethic that has been widely adopted by two core principles that guide many entrepreneurs and startups: failing fast and the pivot. Failing fast is the intentional embrace of experimentation and a mind-set that views failure as an opportunity to learn. Framed as such, it

allows individuals to embrace and try new ideas while also encouraging them to control risk by limiting the investment in an idea until it has proven to have sufficient merit (P. 68).

Olson and Simerson (2015) took note of what visionary leaders do. They took note of the mechanics of visionary leadership, both internal (including mindset, paradigms, mental models, and thought processes) and external (including methodologies, processes, tools, and techniques).

From this analysis, five actions that uniquely distinguish successful visionary leaders are:

1. They monitor trends, with an eye toward disruption and an orientation to opportunities to gain leverage and challenge the status quo.
2. They develop insight, forming and refining a worldview that anticipates future opportunities to address problems in new ways.
3. They design solutions, proposing ideas strategically aligned to address a changing environment in ways that differ from prevailing wisdom.
4. They iterate, moving rapidly through stages of evolution and adapting their vision to accommodate new information or environmental change.
5. They enroll others, using a variety of means and methods to advance their agenda and enlist others to share their view and lend needed support (p. 60).

Some characteristics of visionary leaders such as empowerment, supporting behavior, and intellectual stimulation correlate positively with the organizational commitment of subordinates (Yukl, 2012).

Wickman and Winter (2015) summarize the weaknesses of visionary leaders:

1. Visionaries tend to get bored easily. To spice things up, they start creating new ideas and direction, which gets everyone excited.

2. Most true visionary entrepreneurs have unusual energy, creativity, enthusiasm, and a propensity for taking risks. This can be disruptive, as they love to break the mold. They often show little empathy for the negative impact this can have on capacity, resources, people, and profitability.
3. Due to founder visibility, the team is so tuned in to the visionary and current direction that every turn to the right to pursue a new idea turns the whole team to the right.
4. Visionaries typically don't like running the day-to-day of the business on a long-term basis, and aren't good at following through. Even communicating the vision itself can be quite a challenge, since it's so crystal clear in their head that they can't imagine having to repeat or clarify for others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review acknowledges the historical basis for leadership as a legitimate and essential area of study and research. Evidence includes the successful demonstration of visionary leadership within organizations. House and Shamir (1993) report findings that indicate visionary leadership aligns with charismatic leadership. A review of the theoretical and empirical research literature was conducted to explore the development and validity of visionary leadership as a distinct genre of leadership. This literature review is designed to support the concept of visionary leadership as a distinct domain within the general field of business- focused Leadership.

Bass (2008) has reviewed and analyzed empirical and theoretical leadership research in four editions of his comprehensive handbook on leadership. Further, Bass indicates that the conceptual research in leadership indicates leadership as directing the attention of other members to goals and paths to achieve them. Specifically, Bass contends that leaders are agents of change, whose acts affect other people more than other people's acts affect them.

Yukl (2012) maintains that the unique contribution of the visionary leader is to collect and integrate components of vision provided by followers, making the vision come alive with persuasive articulation. Yukl's research contributes to the literature through the analysis of the major theories focused on empirical findings. Further, Yukl opines that empirical research in the areas of the new leadership theories such as Transformational and Charismatic Leadership is emerging. Specifically, Yukl indicates that studies of this form of leadership have found that it is crucial for the leader to articulate a clear and compelling vision with the needs and values of followers taken into consideration.

Kouzes and Posner (1987) began research in the early 1980s to explore leadership in a variety of organizations. Kouzes and Posner devised a personal-best leadership theory. Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership resulted from extensive qualitative research to determine the leadership competencies that are essential to getting extraordinary things done in organizations. Their research found that one of the leadership competencies that leaders exhibit when they are at their personal best includes the ability to inspire a shared vision. The authors describe the ability to inspire a shared vision as follows: "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, they get people to see exciting possibilities for the future" (p. 14). Kouzes and Posner summed up visionary leaders this way, "Since most people do not take the time to think systematically about the future, those who do and act on their thinking have considerable power to shape the future (1987, p. 32).

Bennis and Nanus (1997) developed and articulated the first complete theoretical portrayal of visionary leadership as a distinct subtype of leadership. Nanus states, "there is no

more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than the attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future widely shared” (p. 108). The essential and most important aspect of successful leadership is visionary leadership. The visionary leader presents a clear picture of the organization. Thus, the essential skills of visionary leaders are the ability to have an image of the most desirable future for the organization and that this idea energizes and maximizes the talents and resources of the entire organization. Specifically, the four dimensions of a successful visionary leader are described by Bennis and Nanus (1997) as possessing the following skills:

1. Direction centered
2. Change agent
3. Spokesperson
4. Coach

Kotter (2012) presented conceptual leadership theory specific to organizations which can successfully transform themselves. Kotter presents the argument for an eight-stage process for creating major change. The change process is:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Creating the guiding coalition
3. Developing a vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Empowering broad-based action
6. Generating short-term wins

7. Consolidating gains in producing more change
8. Anchoring new approaches to the culture

Stages three and four of the change process emphasize qualities associated with visionary leadership theory. The author opines that leadership at this stage requires a leader to create an appealing picture of the future and a logical strategy by which the vision can be achieved. Furthermore, leaders should create visions that are imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable. Stage four of the change process emphasizes that effective communication of the vision to others unleashes the power of the visionary leader. The key elements of the effective communication of a vision must include simplicity, multiple forms, repetition and leadership by example. Finally, the author clearly emphasizes that if followers do not accept the leader's presentation of a vision, the entire transformation process will fail.

Interviews were conducted with Dr. E. Paul Walker to expand the base of literature review for this study. Dr. Walker emphasized an influence on his leadership style by Kotter (2012). He indicated that an attribute of visionary leadership is the ability to think ahead of the current business realities. At the same time, he believes visionary leaders must be well read in and outside the field of business, politics, and education; the visionary must spend considerable time thinking and planning for the future. Dr. Walker indicated that his current thinking about visionary leadership is that true visionary leaders must be effective synthesizers. The emphasis of this study is that in the 21st century the ability to synthesize effectively is the premium skill set for effective leaders.

METHODOLOGY

This portion of the methodology and procedures description underpins the study. Specifically, this research study summarizes the journey and personal experiences of an effective

visionary leader. The interview was conducted to determine if Dr. Walker has experienced a leadership journey which is consistent with the research and literature regarding visionary leadership. The following are the interview questions:

1. Describe the essential attributes of visionary leadership?

Dr. Walker talked of his propensity to take risks all his life. He was quick to add that risk-taking has its' pros and cons, but so does changes. Dr. Walker opined that to move a community forward as was his goal as the State senator, taking risks is inevitable.

2. Please rank order visionary leadership attributes by importance.

3. What are your core purposes as a community advocate and what strategies do you employ to achieve these core purposes?

Dr. Walker reflected on how his goal as the Senator from The 43rd district was to put in place other community stakeholders to get them thinking about the future of their communities. That, he opined was 90% of the work. He continued by stating that once the stakeholders begin to engage in the visionary process, the other 10% is working the vision for the future.

4. What is your core personality trait that you believe enables you to be a visionary leader?

After a moment of thinking, Dr. Walker talked about all the positions he held through the years and how all of the jobs or positions that he was hired for, promoted to or elected to arose out of some form of chaos or conflict. He finished his thoughts by adding that conflict resolution had always been a gift and that he is always called upon to "put out fires."

5. What personal events occurred in your life which you believe allowed you to develop the attributes of a visionary leader?

The *history teacher* in Dr. Walker surfaced as he began to tell of his growing up as a little Black boy in the Deep South. After a brief history lesson concerning the effects of his childhood Dr. Walker commented that he always had the gift of visioning and wherever he went and whatever position he held, he always imagined how what was happening in the present state was affecting the future state.

6. What mentorship experiences did you have, which may have contributed to or inhibited the development of visionary leadership abilities?

With a chuckle, Dr. Walker stated that his mentor was an unlikely character, his Grandma Emma. In a solemn tone he talked of how his Grandma Emma instilled in him from the time that he could talk that in order to be somebody, you had to do your best always *seeing* yourself at the top and once at the top, pull the next persons up.

7. Twenty-five years following your time as State Senator from the 43rd District of DeKalb County, what remains in the district, which could be attributed to your visionary leadership abilities?

Dr. Walker believes that a lasting legacy of his visionary leadership will be a system which is driven by new visionary leaders that have the innate ability to think in innovative ways about the future, a system that challenges the inequities of education and, a system that strengthens the moral fiber of the political system for our progeny.

Data Utilized in the Study

Dr. E. Paul Walker is a native of Thomaston, Georgia and has been a resident of DeKalb County since 1969. Dr. Walker received his Ph.D. in History from Duke University, Durham,

North Carolina, in 1978; a Certificate in Southern History from the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, in 1968, a Masters of Arts Degree in History at Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia, in 1969; and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Social Science at Clark College, Atlanta, Georgia, in 1958. In addition, Dr. Walker received the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship at Duke University and the Experienced Teacher Fellowship Program at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Walker's journey ties into the journey of a visionary leader in the following ways:

Visionary leaders possess strong communication skills and understand human relationships which allow them to bring followers along with them. They clearly articulate a message or vision. In the area of public service, Dr. Walker served as the State Senator for the 43rd Georgia Senatorial District. During that time, Dr. Walker served on the following state Senate Committees: Banking and Financial Institutions, Governmental Operations, Urban and County Affairs.

Visionary leaders are able to clearly articulate a message or vision for the district. It is also important for visionaries to be comfortable working with and facilitating constituents with a wide range of opinions and values. Dr. Eugene Walker was the first person of color to hold the position of Majority Whip of the Georgia State Senate and also served as Chairman of the Georgia Reapportionment Committee, which is assigned once every ten years to provide equity, fairness, and projections of the State of Georgia constituency.

It is also important for visionaries to be comfortable working with and facilitating constituents with a wide range of opinions and values. The core purpose of being a visionary leader involves holding the importance of morals at the highest level. In January 1995, Dr. Eugene Walker received an appointment by Governor Zell Miller and approval by the Board of

the Department of Juvenile Justice as the Commissioner. He served in this capacity until April 1999 when Governor Roy Barnes appointed him to the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, until December 31, 2006.

Dr. Walker articulated that the problems in the State government, the Justice system, and the educational system provide critical challenges for visionary leadership. The challenges require the visionary leader frame the discussion of visionary ideas carefully. Dr. Walker also belongs to and holds office in various criminal justice professional organizations, including the American Correctional Association, the Georgia Correctional Association, the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice, the Parole Association of Georgia and the American Probation and Parole Association. From 2001-2009, Dr. Walker served as chairman of the Development Authority of DeKalb County, the Private Hospital Authority of DeKalb County and the Senior Residential Care Authority of DeKalb County.

This nominated visionary leader believes that visionary leaders are naturally passionate leaders in the community. Dr. Walker indicated that humbleness and pragmatism define the visionary leader. In January 2012, for the first time in three years, the DeKalb County school board elected a new leader from within its' ranks. Dr. Walker was selected by a 6-3 vote of his fellow board members to assume the mantle of chairman. Dr. Walker, a former state senator, and high school teacher said after his selection that his goal was to unite the entire board and to act in the best interest of the school children.

Dr. Walker is eighty-four years old and retired. He still mentors leaders in politics, in business and education.

CONCLUSION

The interview questions provide substantial qualitative data concerning the research of visionary leadership. The findings indicate that Dr. E. Paul Walker has several qualities common to other visionary leaders who have emerged during his professional journey. As with all visionary leaders Dr. Walker is well read and interested in developments in and outside the field of politics. Dr. Walker has used the skills of a visionary leader to create a picture of a preferred future which can be embraced by his community and his constituents.

Dr. Walker's leadership skill of being able to work with various groups to create a shared vision of the future appears entirely consistent with the thinking required in the new global business culture. Dr. Walker has a sense of urgency about excellence in education. This urgency coupled with the recognition of what is required to succeed in the 21st-century. Furthermore, the evidence of this study indicates that personal and professional courage is a hallmark of visionary leaders.

The leadership journey of Dr. Walker as characterized by the positions that he has held presented challenges which required the consistent employment of visionary leadership skills. A critical component of this process includes the capacity for visionary leaders to develop these leadership skills in an environment which at times is inhospitable to visionaries.

Finally, the vision is not "written in stone." Visioning is an ongoing dynamic process if it is to be kept alive and meaningful. A clear vision of the future is a key step for moving forward. The strategic leader moves the organization forward with the future in mind. If leaders want to be effective and bring about organizational transformation, they generally have to change the way they think. Senge opined, "When an organization shares a genuine vision, people excel and learn. This is not because they are told to, but because they want to. In learning organizations,

leaders are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision; that is they are responsible for learning. The organization leader, or executive director, should take on the responsibility for designing the learning process, maintaining that process over time, and leading people through that process” (p.340).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study defines a particular type of visionary leader who could respond to the complicated challenges of 21st-century. A review of the literature revealed that empirical and conceptual research in the area of visionary leadership is limited. In this time of upheaval and crisis, visionary leaders become increasingly important. Globalization and new information technologies have rewritten the rules for organizations. There is compelling evidence by Collins (2006) and Kotter (2008) that visionary leaders must be positioned well to respond to the urgent and accelerated demands for change noted during the first decade of the 21st century. What that change entails demands further research.

References

- Bass, M.B., & Bass, R. (2008). *The Bass handbook of leadership: Theory, research and managerial applications* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Bennis, W., & Nanus, B. (1997). *Leaders: strategies for taking charge*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Covey, S. R. (1991). *Principled-centered leadership*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Collins, J.C. (2006). *Good to great and the social sections: Why business thinking is not the answer*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Collins, J.C. (2002). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap and others don't*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- House, R.J., & Aditya, R.N. (1997). The social scientific study of leadership: Quo vadis? *Journal of Management*, 23(3), 409-473.
- House, R. J., & Shamir, B. (1993). *Toward the integration of transformational, charismatic, and visionary theories*. In M. M. Chemers & R. Ayman (Eds.). *Leadership theory and research: Perspectives and directions* (pp. 81-107). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Kotter, J. P. (2008). *A sense of urgency*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kouzes, J. M. & Posner, B. Z. (1987). *The leadership challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nanus, B. (1992). *Visionary leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Olson, A. K, & Simerson, B. K. (2015). *Leading with strategic thinking*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Wickman, G. & Winter, M. (2015). *Rocket fuel: The one essential combination that will get you more of what you want from your business*. Texas: Benbella Books.

Yukl, G. (2012). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.) New York: Pearson.

Yukl, G. & Lepsinger, R. (2004). *Flexible leadership: Creating value by balancing multiple challenges and choices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

APPENDIX

A referendum by the State Senate of Georgia highlights the public service of Dr.

Walker (copy).

A RESOLUTION

1- 1 Honoring Dr. Eugene P. Walker; and for other purposes.

1- 2 WHEREAS, Dr. Eugene "Gene" P. Walker is a native of
1- 3 Thomaston, Georgia, and has been a resident of DeKalb County
1- 4 since 1969; and

1- 5 WHEREAS, Dr. Walker served with great distinction as the
1- 6 Senator for the 43rd Georgia Senatorial District from 1984
1- 7 to 1992 where he was the first person of color to hold the
1- 8 position of Majority Whip and where he was instrumental in
1- 9 garnering support and votes for major legislation in such
1-10 areas as education, health care, and the economy; and

1-11 WHEREAS, as a member of the Senate, he also served as
1-12 chairman of the Senate Reapportionment Committee; and

1-13 WHEREAS, he is an active member of several civil, community,
1-14 and professional groups including: the Senate Democratic
1-15 Policy Committee, Statewide JTPA Committee, the Georgia
1-16 Endowment for the Humanities, Georgia Partnership for
1-17 Excellence in Education, and the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid
1-18 Transit Authority Overview Committee (MARTOC); and

1-19 WHEREAS, Dr. Walker is also a member of: the Greenforest
1-20 Baptist Church, the Board of Directors for Literary Action,
1-21 Inc., the Board of Directors for United Cerebral Palsy, the
1-22 Board of Directors of Shop 'n Check, the Board of Trustees
1-23 of the John Marshall School of Law, the DeKalb County
1-24 Chapter of 100 Black Men of America, Inc., the NAACP, the
1-25 Butler Street YMCA, the DeKalb County Administrators
1-26 Association, and the DeKalb Chapter of the American Red
1-27 Cross; and

1-28 WHEREAS, in January, 1995, he was appointed by Governor Zell
1-29 Miller and approved by the Board of Children and Youth
1-30 Services as the Commissioner of the Department of Children
1-31 and Youth Services in which position he is responsible for
1-32 providing supervision, detention, and rehabilitation of
1-33 juvenile delinquents committed to the state's custody; and

1-34 WHEREAS, he has been married for 34 years to Patricia Carter
1-35 Walker and they have two children and two grandchildren; and

2- 1 WHEREAS, Dr. Eugene Walker is a public servant of
2- 2 outstanding ability, determination, and deep social
2- 3 conscience who is contributing significantly to his state
2- 4 and its citizens.

2- 5 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that the
2- 6 members of this body recognize and commend Dr. Eugene P.
2- 7 Walker and convey to him their appreciation and highest
2- 8 regard.

2- 9 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Secretary of the Senate is
2-10 authorized and directed to transmit an appropriate copy of
2-11 this resolution to Dr. Eugene P. Walker.

References

Retrieved from: <http://www.legis.ga.gov/Legislation/Archives/19971998/leg/fulltext/sr363.htm>