

Using Vision as Coherence During Unsettling Times

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

Often when we hear “leadership vision” what comes to mind is a grand picture of some idealized future, and the creative and encompassing strategies that will move the entire organization toward realizing the dream. This is certainly true for a part of the definition of vision, but effective actors at all levels in an organization need to provide leadership vision — and it is rarely of this mountaintop variety.

Rather, most of us need to provide coherence to those around us. The better we are at helping our direct reports, peers, and even those higher in the organization understand and make sense of the environment, the more effective our leadership. Humans have a deep-seated need for their surroundings to be coherent. Most of us become disoriented when patterns of meaning and understanding disappear.

This disorientation will lead to despair and increasingly disaffection from norms and authority if clarity or explanation are not provided. Right now, we are in a period in society, in general and in organizations, where conventional coherence is slipping away.

To help with your role as a coherence provider, below is a review of three dimensions of “vision coherence” that leaders can provide.

1. Coherence first begins to slip at the **individual existential level**. The basic question is “Am I at risk?” This survival response is encoded as a response to threats that are unexpected or out of scale. Individuals have different risk tolerances, but the dislocations today are so significant that few will be truly immune. Antonovsky’s work on coherence established a link between three traits that are shared by people and populations who remain healthy in spite of the presence of major life stressors and trauma. These three traits – comprehension, manageability and meaningfulness – provide a guide for leaders as they assist individuals coping with dislocation. **Comprehension** refers to how well we understand the nature of the problems confronting us. A prior *Quick-Takes* covered the dramatic challenges that a *volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous*, or [VUCA](#), moment produces, which can lead some people to be overwhelmed by the problem itself. Taking time to put the challenge into context will be a first step to improving the coherence. But the events before us also need an action-oriented response. This is where leaders can make the challenge **manageable**. In these times, helping our co-workers not only understand the problem, but figure out the next productive steps to take in order to meaningfully respond can go a long way to removing the challenge of the moment and at the same time get needed work underway. There may be longer term and grander responses needed, but let those sit for a while as

About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/quicktakes.

you get them working on what is doable today. Finally, Antonovsky found that healthy responses were found in individuals that, as he said, “participated in a broader ground of **meaning**.” Part of the dislocation being felt today is that many, if not most, of the organizations that provide structure and meaning in our lives have stumbled a bit. And, in many settings we have also been removed from the familiar pattern of social links that anchor our sense of coherence. It is essential to remind those around that this is still a collective undertaking, we all are sharing in the pain of lost coherence, and that the vision, values, and work of our organizations will go on, even if it will likely be redefined, refocused, and reshaped in some way.

2. When times are stressful, we can also experience a **dislocation in our personal narrative**. This is the story of our life that we tell others and use to fix our place and work into the world around us. The plans around future goals and individual personal development may seem at risk now and many may be mourning this loss. I think this can be particularly acute for younger people just beginning their careers. If you lead or mentor these individuals, here are some steps to take.
 - Acknowledge the circumstances and the loss. It is palpable for them so any efforts to dismiss it as a passing event or not of great consequence will not be helpful.
 - Acknowledge the hit, but move quickly to actions that can be taken now, even when full knowledge does not exist — and may not exist for a while. Are there new skills to learn that are needed in the new situation? Are there opportunities for leadership that may not have existed before the changes? Can you help them think creatively about the future and the ways things are changing? Two things always seem to help with this. First, get them to write a page or two about the future and the opportunities that you have discussed. Second, get them focused on starting one thing immediately that fits within that larger plan.
3. We can think of these first two responses as helping individuals make sense of their immediate and long-term response to the stress of dislocation. The third is focused on the **long-term health of the organization that surrounds the individual**. In some ways, the need for comprehension, manageability, and meaningfulness are relevant for organizations and individuals, but there are additional qualities to share about the long-term health of the organization, outlined below.
 - What do we know now and what does it mean for needed changes in the organization for the short and long term?
 - The levels of ambiguity will be higher than they have been, but the team, unit, and/or organization can cope with this through more communication, greater openness, suppressing judgements, assuming good intentions, practicing forgiveness, and extending trust. All of these steps will keep everyone focused on the essential work at hand and help with overall coherence.
 - Flexibility and adaptability will be more valued than ever. These qualities grafted onto the goodwill suggestions just made can actually lead to a new dynamic, problem orientated spirit and practice within most organizations.
 - Acknowledging and demonstrating that resilience and patience will be essential parts of success moving to the future will task everyone with holding and practicing these values.

For most leaders, committing to this form of vision work with our colleagues will be more important than trying to figure out what the future will look like. And when this work is done the individuals and organizations will be better situated as the road ahead becomes clearer.

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com.

About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit www.medicaiddirectors.org.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.