Do the words “vision statement” make you wince? Us too! They make all of us wince when they are developed “on high” and “checked off” the to-do list without another thought.

But … and it seems that in higher education there is always a “but” …

When a department/division adopts a clear vision statement that is used as the guide to decision making, there can be a massive long-term impact. The typical department/division chair is called an academic administrator for good reason. The job is, by tradition or practice, largely administrative in nature. Too many tasks are predictable, repetitive, often-annoying, complicated, and, well, administrative. Helping a department/division create, adopt, and live a vision statement moves the academic administrator’s role toward leadership. It is exactly this leadership that can be used to empower faculty and academic staff.

Our institutions face multiple, often-conflicting challenges that demand leadership, not administration. Effective leadership requires time and energy not available to traditional academic administrators. An effective vision statement allows for delegation of many decisions to those who can help create the desired outcomes. This frees up some valuable time.

Benefits of having a clear vision statement include:

- Saving immense amounts of time previously spent convincing people to act
- Eliminating or greatly shortening arguments about what to do and how to do it
- Establishing a clear basis for budget requests
- Focusing arguments and discussions on the best ways of achieving the agreed-upon destination rather than on personal interests
- Providing clear parameters for decision making by all parties

The final point above is critical to empowering people. When the destination is agreed upon, individuals can be delegated considerable power to make decisions. The standards are clear. The goal is clear. The academic leader no longer must push faculty and staff to try new activities, work on improving student learning, or implement innovations. The shared vision pulls people to work collaboratively, as a unit, assisting each other in achieving a common goal.

Creating a useful vision statement

While there are many good articles and quite a few books on this subject, let’s keep it simple. An effective vision statement answers three key questions:

- Exactly where are we going?
- What standards do we employ, and what are our key values?
- How will we know if we are making progress?
To be accepted, a vision statement must
- be built upon agreement of the people involved,
- be consistently followed (especially when inconvenient!) by all in the decision-making process, and
- include regular opportunities for discussion and revision.

When rigorously followed, an effective vision
- creates a common goal,
- unites people,
- increases trust in leadership (since the basis for decisions is now clear), and
- supplies a standard for everyone’s future actions.

How will this help you empower others?

1. Faculty are typically trained as independent practitioners, whose traditional intellectual model is “find weaknesses in arguments and critique them.” This is not conducive to the effective team behavior necessary to meet today’s challenges. By working collaboratively to build a common vision, everyone, and especially faculty, learns new skills that will, in time, allow campus groups (departments, committees, etc.) to be more effective and efficient.

2. A vision statement is an institutional goal, not a personal one. Having a clear institutional goal provides powerful counterweight to the individualistic model that is paramount among most faculty. People committed to an institutional goal can be delegated more power because they know what is expected and what they will be evaluated against.

3. The leader must trust that others in their areas will act responsibly, with significant concern for institutional priorities. The process of creating a departmental or divisional vision statement will give you insights into individuals that you would not ordinarily possess. Your level of trust in some others will be dramatically increased.

4. Others’ trust of you will be raised based upon their work with you in creating the vision and in the difficult first few months living with it (provided that you are very consistent).

5. A clear goal gives everyone a way to measure their proposed activities. Because of this, decisions can be delegated to others for many projects. These decisions can be clearly evaluated (provided that people know that their actions will be measured against the vision statement).

6. Once people know that the basis for decision making is open and transparent, the amount of disruptive and distrustful organizational politics will almost always decrease considerably.

7. The vision allows every academic leader to continually focus discussions on how the subject at hand affects attainment of the vision. By doing this, academic managers are actually mentoring others to structure much more effective discussions.
8. “Eyes on the prize” really does work. As people rise above their narrowest personal interests, they become organizationally oriented. As this happens, their judgments are based on a global perspective. As this happens, the job of academic administrators at all levels becomes more about helping people learn decision-making and leadership skills—in turn, moving the job from academic administration to academic leadership.

To be honest, didn’t most of us think we would have many more chances to provide and promote leadership than we do in a typical academic institution? It is much more fun, much more interesting, much more rewarding, and, oh yes, much more difficult to be in a leadership position than an administrative one. It is your choice, not your destiny!