

Dilemmas in Family Medicine Education

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Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this issue, the value and purpose of a vision statement is examined as it relates to family practice residency programs. If a program does develop a mission or vision statement, too often these statements are developed and then shelved. The value of developing and keeping the vision statement visible is emphasized. Please note a change of address for sending questions and suggestions to me: David C. Campbell, MD, MEd, c/o Institute for Research and Education in Family Medicine, 4590 South Lindbergh Blvd, St Louis, MO 63127. 314-849-7669. Fax: 314-849-7670. E-mail: DocDave52@aol.com.

Residency Program Vision

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Questions: Both the residency program at which I teach and its parent medical center have mission statements, but the residency program has never developed a vision statement. What can you tell me about a vision statement, and what purpose would it serve our family practice residency program?

Answer: Said simply, vision makes visible the invisible element of collective purpose in a residency program. Vision stimulates resident and faculty movement toward the mission of the program. Terms such as *shared values*, *superordinate goals*, and *central belief systems* have been used to describe organizational vision.

A vision is an image of possible and desirable future states for a resi-

ducing residency program. Visions that have proven to be successful in transforming family practice residency programs have common characteristics. They reflect the core purposes of the organization in a feasible, yet challenging, way and bring a significance that transcends the organization and impacts the teaching-learning community as a whole. Further, a program vision will appeal to the values, emotions, and imagination of residents, faculty, and staff. Crafting vision is important because residents and faculty seek to invest their talents and skills toward organizational success.

Identifying vision for a residency program will entail distinct, unique statements and images of the world in which teaching-learning partners would like to live and work. These statements are tailored to a unique family practice residency program and its residents, faculty, and staff. A residency program vision makes a statement about contributions to patient care and the graduate medical education of residents, rather than procedures, resources, or methods.

To appreciate why vision is important, it is necessary to look at why residency programs exist. Residents rank programs highly because they offer meaningful rewards—educational, psychosocial, and economic. Values held by residents and faculty serve as guidelines to determine what rewards people are seeking. A successful vision statement, for example, would appeal to residents' needs to learn and grow and belong to a group of family physicians that does challenging, creative, and meaningful clinical work in the community. When a program has a widely shared sense of purpose, direction, and desired future state, everyone is able to define their place in making outcomes successful.

The major function, then, of vision in a family practice residency program is to catalyze alignment. When faculty, residents, community attendings, and clinic staff are committed to a shared vision, the relationship among these varied members of the program, and even one's self-concept, may change. When program members are

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aligned, they operate as a whole, recognizing that their actions allow each of them to be true to themselves, as well as true to the program at large. They see that the program purposes and vision are worthy of commitment, and they expand their definition of self to include a sense of unity with others. Alignment pulls together disparate, heterogeneous clinical groups into real working teams. When residents, faculty, and staff are aligned, they capture a sense of empowerment; they work together in a troika to accomplish shared goals in functional harmony.

Will a strong vision do anything else for a family practice residency program? There are no guarantees, of course, but performance may increase noticeably. Vision can provide a stimulus toward excellence by setting goals that exceed current standards and by challenging faculty and residents to stretch and reach. Vision can also help a residency program accommodate change with versatility and resilience because firm vision breeds a willingness to adapt to small, short-term changes that are consistent

with belief systems. In addition, vision serves to describe "what could be" and "what should be" and can guide the change-making process. Similarly, vision can be a frame of reference in making decisions about both the immediate and long-term future.

Vision is also useful in creating a program "culture" of commitment. Commitment is empowering because committed doctors find the emotional resources to be creative and innovative. Even conflict resolution goes better with clear vision. Vision becomes a healthy platform for conflict resolution rather than using power plays, game playing, and personal idiosyncrasies.

If crafting vision is such an important element in effective and successful family practice residency programs, why isn't it something we all did a long time ago? The answer lies in the complexity of most family practice residency programs. Most have faculty, resident, and community attending groups who, in their rich diversity, have varying and sometimes conflicting purposes, values, and beliefs. Developing and maintaining

a program vision may seem foreboding because of this diversity. In addition, many family practice residency programs are just now recognizing the importance of vision as they struggle to maintain a positive future. Finally, the leadership skills of many program directors and chief residents are only now being developed to include the use of vision.

By developing, adopting, and maintaining a visionary approach in family medicine postgraduate education, real and significant change can occur. Where once energy and time were exclusively devoted to crisis management and daily problem solving, new, more-reflective practices can emerge while organizational disharmony and dysfunctional conflict melt away. Building and honoring a vision statement may be the most important single step a family practice residency program can take as it transitions to a new millennium.

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