



Teaching the Elephant to Dance:

Developing a Vision for Change

By: Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

For several years, I led semi-annual classes sponsored by CHIME at the University of Michigan. In those classes, I often discussed a book called *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*, which compared organizations to elephants. Both are large, ponderous organisms that learn through conditioning. And once conditioned, both tend to keep operating in the same way over time.

Baby circus elephants are leashed to a pole and led around it. As they grow, they become accustomed to following the same path around the pole, even though they could easily break the leash if they tried. By the time the leash is removed, the elephant has become thoroughly conditioned: while it could diverge from its course around the pole at any time, it keeps on trudging. Many of today's healthcare organizations find themselves in a similar position. Faced with proposed Medicare cuts, staggering nurse shortages, fierce new competition, and tough regulatory mandates, we just can't afford to keep plodding around the same old pole.

How to break free from the beaten path and set a new course? Vision! The way to change the future is to cultivate a vision of what might be possible. A clear picture of where you want to go is the key to mobilizing the support you need to get there. It's the road map for your actions: one that reflects your organization's most deeply felt values and its strategic goals.

As a leader, you must be able to clearly articulate your vision—and do it frequently. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet and expect people to follow. A clear vision illuminates what needs to be done and shows how it is to be implemented. It puts a stake in the ground; guides decisions; inspires action. It keeps us tightly focused.

We can cite many examples of the power of a clear and articulate vision. Gandhi had a clear vision, to the point where people tried to place themselves in his shadow as he passed by. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream changed our society. John Kennedy had a vision—realized in 1969—of placing a man on the moon. Lee Iacocca's vision sold the U.S. government on the largest corporate bail-out in our history. As these examples demonstrate, inspiring visions empower people toward a set of focused actions.

But how do you develop this vision? Start by bouncing your ideas off of a small group of peers and subordinates. Talk to people informally and seek their reactions. Elicit formal input from surveys, consultants, and classes. And finally, stay flexible and focus on key strategies—not just on tactics that will not have a significant impact.

How to break free from the beaten path and set a new course? Vision! The way to change the future is to cultivate a vision of what might be possible. A clear picture of where you want to go is the key to mobilizing the support you need to get there.



Ward Keever serves as Executive Director for CTG HealthCare Solutions' Executive Services. As a former CIO, he has over 35 years of experience in the healthcare IT industry, with a strong background in strategy development and implementing strategic and tactical IT systems in large health system settings and specific solutions for applications within the healthcare industry.

*For more information, contact:
Ward Keever
ward.keever@ctghs.com*

Another important aspect of developing a vision is to anticipate and get ready to handle obstacles. They're inevitable, and if you're not prepared, they will create anguish and undercut your ability to achieve your goals. Common obstacles include:

- *Elapsed time:* Plans almost always take longer to realize than anticipated.
- *Expectations:* They tend to be exaggerated.
- *Critics:* These—often proponents of staying on the same old path around the pole—come with the territory.
- *Procrastination:* A reason can always be found to delay.
- *Imperfection:* We've all heard the phrase: "The perfect is the enemy of the good": it's important to recognize when 'close enough' is good enough.

As a healthcare executive, you have many opportunities to craft and articulate a 'breakout' vision that can lead to significant improvements in your organization's ability to pursue its mission and serve its constituents. For example:

- *A successful Regional Healthcare Information Organization (RHIO)* that includes ongoing funding and enthusiastic physician participation.
- *Clinical transformation* that, rather than just standardizing care levels among nurse stations and physicians, enables clinicians to practice to a new standard of care. A vision that can achieve this goal must encompass more than the installation of new application software: it requires evaluation of how care will be positively impacted.
- *Construction of an integrated telecommunications network* that can address wireless, wi-fi (802.11), telemetry, pagers, and the like without investing scarce capital in technology that becomes obsolete before the applications are fully operational. An effective vision must first define how such a network will facilitate the practice of medicine by physicians and clinicians in your organization.
- *Creation of a competitive advantage* for your organization by attracting more patients who have the option of selecting a competitor, or by making the practice of medicine more rewarding for physicians who may have admitting privileges at multiple hospitals

As a leader, you are responsible for developing and promoting a comprehensive vision that can generate momentum, promote the implementation of well thought-out strategies, and set your organization on a well-directed new course. To be an effective CIO with the support of the entire organization, you must be able to demonstrate a positive impact on cash flow, quality of care, and competitive advantage. As you listen to the presentations and review the vendor offerings featured at the upcoming HIMSS conference, be aware that it presents an ideal venue for seeking formal and informal input that can help you develop or enhance your vision. It's a great opportunity to start that elephant moving in a brand-new direction.