Leadership, quality, and school improvement: A reflection

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Abstract

The author discussed the notion of leadership as instilling within individuals and infusing within a community the greater capacity for experiencing quality. The meaning of capacity and quality was deconstructed to provide clarity. Capacity was viewed as the potentiality of individuals to assume multiple roles, view events from different circumstances, and determine action from a variety of possible responses. The author defined *quality* as the close alignment of a mental model to the current reality of a situation. An argument was elaborated concluding that school leadership requires empowerment, but without the requirement for inquiry as well, quality remains unattainable.

Leadership, Quality and School Improvement: A Reflection

The concept of leadership is dynamic and illusive. We use the word frequently, but when pressed for an attempt to fully define the concept; our words fail to encapsulate its entire meaning. John Gardener (1990), a recognized expert on leadership, defined leadership as, "the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers" (p.1).   Still this definition appears incomplete in that it makes no attempt to address quality. For example, a classroom teacher has the opportunity to berate, nag, and by sheer force of threat vitiate young minds into accomplishing the objectives of the daily lesson. According to the definition provided above, such behavior would pass as leadership. Yet, there is a vast difference between the concepts of leadership and brow-beating. What is meant by quality leadership? What do educational systems that apply quality leadership look like? This reflection examined the notion of quality leadership and theorized its application in schools.

Evolution in Meaning

The concept of leadership currently held has evolved. ~~Fifty~~ Seventy years ago, the concept of ~~leadership~~ administration focused on principles similar to those articulated by Henri Fayol—plan, organize, command, coordinate, and control (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). The ~~leadership~~ administrative challenge was getting the job done through others. As the industrial era began to give way to an information age in the middle of the twentieth century, assumptions of efficiency gave way to a focus on relationships and the concept of leadership evolved to a more sophisticated level. In contrast to the previous paradigm, scientific management, constituents were viewed more as individuals—they assumed a

more subjective role in the conception. ~~Explanations to workers were given more freely~~ Workers were beginning to receive explanations more freely for the purpose of increasing motivation (McGregor, 1957). In this understanding of leadership, the leadership challenge was to make work as automatic as possible reducing errors and personality clashes rather than through supervision and organization alone as with scientific management (Janis, 1971; Ouchi, 1981). Yet, this too was found to be lacking.

From the ashes of these previous paradigms, a third understanding of leadership has emerged. It ~~conceived~~ conceives leadership as instilling within individuals and infusing within an organizational community a greater capacity for experiencing quality (Sergiovanni, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2002. It is important for a leader to be skilled in management (Bowman & Deal, 2007; ISLLC, 2007). It is critical for a leader to see all people as individual agents possessing individual strengths, weaknesses, unique understandings and motivations (Thomas & Ely, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2007). However, these qualities are only the foundation. To extend beyond this foundation, one must search for the meaning in the two words most frequently used in leadership literature—capacity and quality (Leithwood, 2007). Ironically, these words are used so often, by so many, for so many different purposes and in such diverse contexts that *quality* has become mundane, and discussion of *capacity* seems limiting.

The word, capacity, has several different meanings: the ability to hold volume, potentiality, and a position or character assigned or assumed (Merriam Co., 1977). The first meaning leads to the assumption that people are objects and ability is static. Using a more dynamic meaning, capacity is the potentiality of individuals to assume multiple roles, view events from different circumstances, and determine action from a variety of

possible responses: a potentiality of assumed character. ~~Therefore, use of the word capacity~~ This shade of meaning in the definition of leadership~~, directly implies leadership increases the~~ seems to imply a potentiality for individual reflective action and choice as well as ~~the~~ potentiality for ~~acceptance of~~accepting a diversity and responsiveness within the organizational community.

*~~In discussing~~ Q*quality~~, it~~ is used as a noun, but not ~~as~~ a thing, rather as an event. It is meant to convey "a peculiar and essential character", or "the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation." (Merriam Co., 1977, p. 944). ~~It~~ Quality is the opposite of mundane.

Persig (1974) puts it best when he writes, "Quality takes you out of yourself, makes you aware of the world around y~~ou, ou…~~it is the event at which the subject becomes aware of the object" (p.214-215). ~~—~~This meaning of quality is essential to the understanding of leadership. Through this notion of quality, each individual is connected to a current context. Persig elaborates on this concept of quality asserting it to be the sensory awareness that occurs prior to conscious awareness of the perception. Once intellectually perceived, the perception evolves into a memory of the perception. As a memory, preconceptions frame the sensation so that what is perceived is no longer reality, but a representation of what was real. Reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave, thought reflects reality and direct assess to reality is denied. Quality exists in the experience of reality (Dewey, 1910). The closer our perceptual frames are to this pre-intellectual sensation of reality, the keener our experience of quality.

Senge (1999) ~~used~~ uses a similar idea in describing mental models. A mental model is "an integrated set of ideas and practices that shape the ways people view and interact

with the world" (Senge, 1999, p. 2). Within working memory is a mental representation of reality. Mental models dictate which sensations have quality and which are not important, and as such shape individual perception of events. Just as mental models shape perception, they also shape goals, guide response approaches or strategies and determine the tactics used in specific contexts (Kim, 1993; Ruff & Shoho, 2005). Thus, a mental model not aligned with current reality will not only create errors in perception, but impact assumptions contained in goals, the approach, and the methods used to respond to perceptions. In other words, the closer our mental models align with the current reality, the closer we come to achieving quality.

~~Calling the concept of mental models, *analogues*, Persig captured the scope of this notion of quality.~~

~~We constantly seek to find, in the Quality event, analogues to our previous experiences. If we didn't we'd be unable to act. We build up our language in terms of these analogues. We build up our whole culture in terms of these analogues. … The easiest intellectual analogue of pure Quality is the response of an organism to its environment…We advanced organisms respond to our environment with the invention of many marvelous analogues. We call these analogues reality. … That which causes us to invent the analogues is Quality. Quality is the continuing stimulus which our environment puts upon us to create the world in which we live. (Persig, 1974, p.225)~~Argyris (1993) wrote

It is precisely under profound uncertainty and ambiguity, when one cannot know what truth is, that Model II inquiry [the public

testing of privately held assumptions and attributions] is most needed and most likely to create the conditions for good dialectic. (Argyris, 1993, p.25).

Shared Mental Models and Organizational Routines

In order to alter the infrastructure of relationships, individuals within the organization must change their mental models. Sarason (1990) ~~argued~~ argues that altering a network of relationships requires, "confronting the failures of the past, especially their undergirding axioms—those unarticulated, not-to-be-challenged assumptions so effectively assimilated by us in the course of our socialization" (p. 111). Cumulatively, undiscussable assumptions held by individuals within an organization serve to protect group members and oneself from embarrassment or threat and form the basis for organizational defensive routines (Argyris, 1993, 1999). The childhood fable of the Emperor's New Clothes is a classic example of such a defensive routine. Because personal threat was great to members of the Emperor's court and embarrassment was great to the Emperor, no one acknowledged that the Emperor wore no clothes. Strategies were skillfully used by all to by-pass and cover-up the facts as well as mask the cover-ups. There was a circular reinforcing process sustaining the cover-up going from the individual, to the group and back to the individual.

A circular casual process self-reinforcing an individual's defensive behavior creates and sustains organizational defensive routines (Argyris, 1999). Defensive strategies tend to by-pass and cover-up factual data. Because of potential embarrassment or threat, these by-pass and cover-up strategies extend to work groups and potentially

throughout the organization, creating areas of assumptions that are never tested or challenged because, the topics are undiscussable.

In addition to articulating the nature of organizational defensive routines, Argyris (1993, 1999) provided provides a framework for evaluating the infrastructure of relationships and paradigms used within an organization. By collecting information about individual values, tacit assumptions, reasoning processes and action strategies, one can hypothesize as to the initial consequences of these factors on group dynamics. With the initial consequences determined, the collected information combines with these initial consequences to arrive at sustaining consequences. In other words, the initial situation provides the foundation for sustaining the situation because the initial consequences become a part of the loop in sustaining future consequences. By understanding this sustaining loop, the shared mental models of an organizational culture can be better understood. This leads to an understanding of decision-making and problem solving within the organization. These actions have consequences for leadership, membership and individual commitment to the group. These consequences serve to reinforce or extinguish the original values, assumptions, processes, and strategies. The paradigm used by the organization contains the same elements and follows the same dynamics as the mental model used by the individual (Schein, 1993; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas,Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000). Therefore, understanding and modifying the mental models used by school leaders can establish leverage capable of shifting the entire paradigm of the organization.

Leadership is instilling within individuals and infusing within the organizational community a greater capacity for experiencing quality. Imbedded in this conception is

the assumption that the leader must be a competent manager and must be able to see and respond to each person in the group as an individual. Yet, the most essential facet of leadership is unleashing the potential within each individual by continually reinventing the patterns that are successful in creating a responsive culture and accomplishing the work of the group (Schein, 1993). Furthermore, all members of the group must continuously question organizational routines (Argyris, 1992; Barth 2007). These shared mental models reinvented as necessary to sustain leadership.

<div style="text-align:center">Connection to a Broader Context</div>

The notion of quality espoused above is a principle idea of leadership. The argument asserted asserts an epistemological basis for quality as defined by the juncture where the subjective and objective meet. *Quality*, as a synthesis of the subjective and objective defines truth at all levels of societal systems--the individual level, the group level and the cultural level.

Quality is not a sole property of an object, nor is it totally in the mind of the observer, but rather it emerges from the interaction of both. The epistemological basis for this notion originates in Kant's (1781/1900) idea of *a priori* concepts. Writing against the notion that the mind is a blank slate filled totally and solely by experience, Kant argued that certain concepts must be etched on the mind or identification of the same object viewed from two separate perspectives would be perceived as two separate objects. If experience were limited to only sensations, then an object viewed from two different perspectives would produce two separate image sensations and therefore appear as two separate objects. Since the same object is perceived as the same regardless of perspective, he concluded concludes that some information must be contained within the

mind beyond before sensation occurs. This information he callsed *a priori* knowledge. Knowledge of mathematics and geometry, cause and effect, object permanence, and time were are included as examples of *a priori* knowledge.

Quality is not a fixed concept of the mind, nor is it a property of an object. Like other *a priori* knowledge, quality begins to exist as the mind interacts with the object and forms a mental model of current reality. The history of Kant may be interesting, but only as it related to a current understanding of the brain. Nothing current is presented. If it is presented as philosophy, it is still only as legitimate as its ability to find consilience with brain science.

It is from this mental model of current reality that truth emerges. You are a long way from convincing me of this assertion. Until recently, Western thought has focused on finding the absolute truths of this world. With the downfall of absolute truth comes relative truth, truth constructed by a culture to describe a specific context, and nihilism, the belief that no truths exist at all. Nitzsche (1887/1959) arguesd that the predisposition of man inclines him to search for meaning beyond himself. Meaning is established by shared experiences and values working together within a group (Bruner, 1996). Relating this back to the notion of quality as inventing and reinventing mental models, these shared mental models provide the basis for shared meaning among the group. Leadership, therefore, connects the group to its broader context, but also continually involves the group in creating and re-creating its culture in alignment with the context.

Implications for School Improvement

For more than twenty-five years the accountability reform movement has sought to align public education systems with the needs of a post-modern society. Societal need

has pressured American public education to increase its capacity at an unprecedented rate. At the classroom, school, district and state levels, leadership must occur if such increased capacity is to be realized. Such leadership must facilitate teams to examine, critically and continually, the existing shared mental models of reality necessary to move schools into closer alignment with the needs of the community and the public education system into closer alignment with the needs of society.

The conception of quality espoused in this paper is critical to transforming public school systems into responsive social institutions. For years, school administrators have viewed leadership as a static set of policies and procedures engineered to withstand the dynamics of individual behavior and initiative (Hoy & Miskle, 1996). A recent study of role assumptions found that a key assumption of principals focused on the development of programs to standardize school practices (Ruff, 2006). This type of leadership, a leadership based almost solely on fixed standards of performance and static routine, and often referred to as management, fails to take into account the dynamics of an open system. School improvement cannot produce lasting change without deep structural change and cultural changes (Sarason, 1990; Tye, 2000). Focused on the concept of quality, as outlined above, leadership seeks to go beyond surface level changes and reorganization by facilitating and harnessing individual and group strengths focused toward continual improvement and deep structural changes in both the tasks of the work and the culture. A static view of leadership must give way to one that is dynamic and complex.

Teachers, principals, and superintendents must view their leadership from the perspective that asks, "How can I best convey the meaning of *organizational*

expectations?" rather than from a personal frame of involvement (Ruff & Shoho, 2005). The meaning of organizational expectations extends beyond school board policy to encompass the expectations placed on the school by the students, teachers, parents, community members, and district staff, as well as state and local policies. Such a shift in mental model is likely to transform the classroom from teacher-centered to student-centered. ~~For the~~The teacher, as the classroom leader, would focus on the meaning students glean from each lesson (see Marzano, Waters & McNutly, 2005). At the school level, such a shift is likely to unleash the constrained capacity throughout the school. The principal, as school leader, would focus on the meaning of instruction understood by the teachers improving collaboration, inquiry and empowerment. At the district level, a bureaucratic hierarchy will likely transform into a learning community (~~see~~ Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003). District leaders would focus on the meaning of student achievement held by each school and its culture. This understanding would open communication, trust, and provide the method for aligning values across the district to construct an explicit meaning of student achievement conveyed both internally and externally.

~~To achieve such a shift entails~~This shift will require vanquishing preconceptions of the leader as hero or heroine. Communities of heroes and heroines are required for educational reform (Murphy & Seashore-Lewis, 1994). Participatory engagement in the proposed model replaces organizational hierarchy. Control inherent in a hierarchy constrains capacity. Shared meaning provides profound organizing power within organizations of people. Furthermore, the resistance to organizational change so

frequently observed and reported is a resistance to control. Life resists control, not

change (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

Instilling capacity for experiencing quality goes beyond site-based management

and delegation of authority. To continuously reinvent the shared mental models of

quality, sustained inquiry by each individual is required. Assumptions must be

perpetually questioned and tacit knowledge challenged to sustain the quality of the

perceptual lens. Goals must be critically judged in terms of their relevance to a

meaningful and sustainable vision of what education can be. Methods and approaches

must be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency toward achieving the

ever-evolving mosaic of vision developed by the school community. Shared mental

models of quality stem from the alignment of meanings held by members of the school

community and the existing situation confronting the school community. Without

continuous inquiry, data gathering and analysis, and challenges to the status quo, the

capacity of a school is severely limited. School leadership requires empowerment, but

without the requirement for inquiry as well, quality remains unattainable. In conclusion,

understanding leadership as instilling within individuals and infusing within the

community a greater capacity for experiencing quality presupposes the necessity for

leaders to articulate the meaning of shared purpose through empowerment and on-going

inquiry.

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