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Co-created leadership: Looking within the organization

Mary Parker Follett devoted a lifetime of searching for the true principles of organizational leadership which would “ensure a stable foundation for the steady, ordered progress of human well-being” (Metcalf & Urwick, 1940, p.7). Today, educators are searching for the same principles of leadership which would ensure a stable foundation for the steady, ordered progress of academic achievement in the face of rising standards and expectations. In distinguishing between leadership and decision-making, Follett (1927) indicated “that the leader has not always the largest share in decision-making, and yet he may not thereby be any less the leader” (p. 257). No one leader knows enough to make all the decisions. For this reason, Freire (1990) advocated the practice of co-intentional education where leaders and the led are both subjects not only in the task of unveiling reality, but also in the task of creating and recreating knowledge. Spillane (2006, p59) emphasized co-performance because it allowed for “the possibility that those performing the routine might, intentionally or unintentionally, pursue different or even contrary goals.” The imperative need of the moment is to search for the best methods of coordination for collective control in which leaders are guided by, are responsive to, and draw their authority from those whom they lead (Handy, 1997).

Previous conceptual models of school leadership have often focused on distributed or shared patterns of control where some of the leadership authority is transferred to staff, altering the balance of power (Ogawa & Bossert, 2000; Weiss & Cambone, 2000). Camburn (2004) reported that distributed or shared leadership places emphasis on “the distribution of leadership responsibilities to teachers” with a focus on how leadership activities or responsibilities are spread across multiple roles (p 2). Implicit in the process of distribution is hierarchy and ownership. Pertinent to the limitations of distributive and shared leadership are the findings by Weiss and Cambone (2000) in a study of the dilemmas of Shared Decision Making (SDM) in schools. When schools adopted SDM, principals’ authority was limited and they experienced a heightened level of conflict among the faculty. Whether SDM was used for purposes of realizing change or for its own sake, reform was at best modest. In brief, their study found that SDM enhanced teachers’ opportunities to influence decisions in the school, but a relatively small number of teachers became active in the process. SDM took a great deal of their time and energy and yet the decision with and without SDM were only modestly different. SDM schools discussed somewhat more innovative decisions, but the new ideas were more likely to have come from principals than from teachers.

While distributed and shared leadership approaches have proven useful, another premise that is both descriptive and prescriptive for school leaders in the field is co-created leadership. This concept recognizes the collaborative reality of the work place in the 21st century and the school as it is being redefined. Co-created leadership presumes that there is more capacity for leadership among teachers and school communities that could be utilized to create more opportunities for stakeholders to construct and maintain leadership in a continual conversation. To accomplish this, Bruffee (1993) suggested that we understand the “craft of interdependence,” which are the dispositions needed to foster constructive human interaction and conversation for learning and to become learned (p. xiii). The focal point of interdependence is the presence of dispositions that will enhance collaboration and empower members to contribute and take ownership. In this case, the

[leaders] become the agents of their members rather than their “bosses.” They manage because, in a sense, their workers want them to manage. They draw their authority from the people over whom it is to be exercised. Even though this makes the job of manager more difficult, it is much more legitimate (Handy, 1997). In terms of democracy, in subtle ways, true leaders are “elected” by their subordinates.

Such sentiments stand in stark contrast to the organizational world in which schools have so often operated. As Diana Chapman Walsh (1997) notes,

So much of leadership in our society is radically cut off from any inner voice. So much of leadership emphasizes form over content and style over substance. It trades on simplistic, cynical notions about how to lead: through manipulation, bullying, tactics, slickness, hollow rhetoric, image management, spin doctoring, sound bites. These manipulations are devices which leaders seize out of a need to paper over their unexamined fear of exposure, isolation, rejection (p.299).

Robert Greenleaf (1991) declared that “A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted to the leaders . . .” (p. 10). More specific to schools, Roland Barth (1990) inquires of leaders, “How can we unlock the extraordinary idealism, vision and energy that are sealed within teachers and principals and students?” (p.47). Max DePree (2004, p. xvi.) approaches this notion in still another way, which he describes as, “abandoning oneself to the strength of others.” DePree (2004) further “pushes the envelope” when he states, “True covenants, however, are risky because they require us to be abandoned to the talent and skills of others, and, therefore, to be vulnerable” (p.38). It is evident from these authors that leadership is a collective process and responsibility. How can research conceptualize this leadership? This survey research elicited teachers’ perceptions on the practice of dispositions that together lead to co-created efforts.

Conceptual framework

It is generally recognized that there are different degrees and types of leadership, and that people have capacity for leadership. Recognizing the existence of degrees and types of leadership in an organization may lead to methods of management that make the most effective use of such leadership capacity (Follett, 1932). The leader may choose to guide the group and at the same time is himself guided by the group. Those led have not merely a passive role to follow and obey. They actually help to keep the leader in control of the situation. Mary Parker Follett referred to this leadership as “correlation control” in which the authority of the chief executive is not an arbitrary authority imposed from above, but the gathering up of many authorities found at different points in the organization (Follett, 1932, p. 296). This is democratic leadership that “works toward an honest integration of all points of view, to the end that every individuality may be mobilized and made to count both as a person and an effective part of his group and of society as a whole” (Metcalf & Urwick, 1940, p. 9). Follett’s thesis was that in organizations there is a reciprocal nature of interpenetration. Interpenetration occurs when the parties of interest evoke each others latent ideas based upon the facts of the situation, when they come to see each other’s viewpoints and to understand each other better, and when those view points are integrated to become united in the pursuit of their common goal. A central tenet of co-created leadership is integration - the interweaving and interpenetrating of the best ideas from both the leader and the led in continuously creating new responses and solutions to challenges. The leader then, has sufficient insight

not only to meet the next situation, but also to create the next situation. Quin (1992), Drucker (1993), Bruffee (1993) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have supported Follett in their shared view that the successes of organizations lie more in their integrative human resource (intellectual and service) capabilities than in hard assets. To capitalize on these human resource capabilities, leaders must acknowledge the potential of members and engage them in continual conversation and reculturation by marshalling interdependence (Bruffee, 1993). The value of intellectual abilities and service depends primarily on learning and creating collaboratively. Co-creating helps members learn more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently.

What in fact are the leadership dispositions that lead to the co-created leadership “moment”? First, consider the work of William Ouchi (1981) in *Theory Z* in which he places freedom and trust in workers as long as those workers have a strong loyalty and interest in team-work and the organization. The qualities cited in the successful organizations he studied include patience, subtlety and trust. Bruffee (1993) emphasized collaborative learning as it helps people learn to construct knowledge and the craft of interdependence necessary to succeed in a complex world. Follett (1927) espoused honesty, listening, co-operation, and endurance as features of collective control. Freire (1990) explained that trust is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change and that a real humanist can be identified more by his trust in people. Collins (2001) explained that great leaders have humility, will and are resolute. These dispositions enable a leader to recognize that power and authority are derived from many sources. To believe that power and authority descends from above assumes that they are divinely given. Even though such divine rights may apply to kings, such “divinity” seems remote from school leaders.

Based on literature Murpy, Hunt, and Wasonga, (2004) identified eight dispositions as exemplars of co-created leadership: Collaboration; Active Listening; Cultural Anthropology; Egalitarianism; Patience; Humbleness; Trust and Trustworthiness; and Resiliency. These dispositions were believed to enable leaders to exercise collective power to lead and recognize the importance of inviting the organization’s members into the leadership dynamic.

Method and Data Source

A deductive qualitative analysis research method where data is analyzed based on an existing framework was used in this study (Patton, 2002). Twenty five aspiring school leaders were invited to participate in the study. They were provided with an article describing the dispositions identified as exemplars necessary to practice the concept of co-created leadership (Murpy, Hunt, & Wasonga, 2004) to study and respond to a set of questions. The article provided an existing framework and expanded on the identified dispositions which included: Collaboration; Active Listening; Cultural Anthropology; Egalitarianism; Patience; Humbleness; Trusted and Trustworthiness. Twenty one aspiring school leaders returned their written responses to the survey questions regarding their perceptions of the practice of these dispositions in their schools. All of the respondents had worked in their school district for at least five years. Seven of the respondents were elementary school teachers, eight were middle or junior high school teachers and five high school teachers. Respondents were requested to provide written responses to the following questions for each of the dispositions.

- 1) Describe instances where you have witnessed the practice of this disposition in your school?
- 2) Explain why this disposition is important to a successful leader?
- 3) Describe instances where the application/practice of this disposition has been especially successful? Give examples.
- 4) Describe instances where the absence/misapplication of this disposition has caused negative effects. Give examples.
- 5) List the top three of these dispositions of leadership that you feel are most essential to impact student outcomes?
- 6) How would you explain co-created leadership?

The written responses were analyzed to match the existing framework and to discover “what is important, and what is to be learned and deciding what you (we) will tell others” (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

Data indicated that participants recognized the presence of all of the cited dispositions in their schools. The findings also indicated that the absence of patience, trust and trust worthiness, and active listening led to negative outcomes.

Some respondents were intrigued by the idea of co-created leadership. One respondent wrote, “it is very moving and powerful to think that, ‘giving away power actually makes one more powerful,’ and that this shared power actually makes more leaders around you.” “Co-created leadership is a wonderful idea...a great way to define the true meaning of leadership and not just that of a leader. Leadership is a process not a person.” Still, others were skeptical, “it is not easy to let someone else take the lead,” “the theory is interesting and optimistic, but one must wonder about the possibility of it truly existing.” “I believe all leaders who are successful have these traits, but many have difficulty demonstrating these traits consistently.”

The value of co-created leadership was captured in the following reflections: “Co-created leadership takes into account the ideas of not only those in charge of a group, but those that contribute to the group, and allows leadership to develop amongst the entire group for the betterment of the whole.” And, “Being able to have faith in those you work with and allowing them the opportunity to develop. With this concept in place, schools can become places where we utilize everyone’s strengths and knowledge-base to the fullest.” The top three qualities of leadership that respondents listed as the most essential to impact student outcomes were collaboration, active listening, and trust and trustworthiness. These qualities were found to empower others so that the organization is not dependent upon one person; “the school has to run effectively even in the absence of the administrator.”

How did these dispositions for co-created leadership impact school leadership?

Collaborators. According to Lunenburg & Ornstein (2004), there is an assumption that administrators know what collaboration means, how it is practiced and what actually happens. DePree (2004) described collaboration as abandoning self “to the strengths of others, admitting that we cannot know nor do everything” (p. 9). Bruffee (1993) described collaboration as the “willingness to grant authority to peers, courage to accept the authority granted to oneself by peers, and skill in the craft of interdependence” (p. 12). Collaboration begins with the leaders’ understanding of the diversity of peoples’

gifts, talents, and skills. Since power, information, authority, and talents reside throughout the school community, leaders must engage many resource, just as the members must engage the leader. Collaboration assumes that schools are organized as communities that value interaction and provide opportunities for colleagues to work together. It requires that professional teams, and/or committee members interact with mutual respect and open communication, and that they jointly consider issues or problems, shared decision making, and joint ownership of purpose or programs (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, p. 523). Collaborative exchanges in a school may cut across grades, departments, and programs to engage a greater amount of communication and collegiality. Thus, it requires the replacement of traditional power roles with collegial-peer relationships that rely on “conditions of trust, openness, risk-taking, problem identification, problem-solving and goal setting” (Hansen & Mathews, 2002, p 31).

In this study, collaboration was found to allow access to more ideas, and to encourage innovation and input from a variety of sources. For example, “it allowed others to involve themselves as a contributor and in the process gain ‘ownership.’” However, respondents indicated that collaboration that is not genuine led to negative effects; “our principal created a collaborative project for reading, and then decided to go a different direction without informing the committee leaving them with a lot of completed work and no audience.” Collaborative efforts must be and must be seen to be of value, sanctioned and supported by the leader. Respondents indicated that collaboration without conviction about the people’s efforts and gifts were seen as counterproductive.

Active listeners. That co-created leaders should be good listeners may be obvious. Yet it was reported that very little high-quality listening went on in the respondents’ schools. Listening is often a challenge because the traditional heroic image of leaders may cause some to believe that they possess the important information and knowledge and they do not see listening to others as essential (Murphy, 2000). These leaders would rather persuade than engage others, make assumptions about others, and underestimate the value of listening. Good listening involves an active effort to understand the world from another’s perspective. It requires both an analysis of what has been said and a sense of what has been left out, testing out-loud what one has heard to make certain that the speakers’ meaning has been captured, and acting as if the speakers’ topic is central (Murphy, 2000). To listen well takes practice, energy, and hard work. But it is essential for gathering information about organizational activities.

Listening skills affect the quality of colleague and superordinate-subordinate relationships in schools (Freshour, 1989). It is not enough to know just the facts; a leader also needs to understand the feelings, the meanings, and the perceptions that are tied to these facts (Murphy, 2000). At an emotional level, listening is frequently the best thing that an administrator can do. A participant in this study wrote “Murphy has given the one rule of thumb about listening, “if you don’t listen to others, they won’t listen to you.”

Respondents’ reflections indicated that active listening demonstrates empathy, an understanding of others and their thoughts allowing the leader to address their real concerns. An active listener does not assume to know the speaker’s intention. Rather, the listener probes, repeats, rephrases and asks for suggestions. As stated by a respondent, “Educators do not need someone just to listen to them; they need support on their ideas,

reflections on the thought processes, or a pointer in a given direction.” Co-created leaders realize that every exchange with a school community member is an opportunity to extend understanding of the organization and to reinforce the leadership of both parties. One respondent explained active listening by wondering “why we have two ears and one mouth. Because we are supposed to listen twice as much as we talk.” “Listening is an opportunity for a leader to improve knowledge on issues affecting school.” Another respondent indicated that “listening is one of the single most important qualities of a leader. You have to listen if you want to co-create leadership.”

Cultural anthropologists. A leader who is a cultural anthropologist studies, understands and uses the cultural context of the school in creating the future. “The ability to ‘read’ and understand what is happening in one’s organization is a key managerial competence” (Morgan, 1997, p.355). Morgan advises leaders to broaden their understanding of culture as this makes it possible to broaden the range of actions through which they approach key issues. In this process leaders learn to generate, integrate, and use insights of competing metaphors to understand and shape the situations they are seeking to organize and manage.

Effective school leaders consider the nuances of the culture of the organization, its membership and goals in order to respond, influence and disseminate information to the school community. Such leaders recognize and participate in the informal cultural network in order to gain members’ trust and support. All of these forces are dynamic and powerful. Too often they may be overlooked and rejected. The informal network or the “grapevine” is one example of the subtle yet powerful dynamics within an organization. “If a person is to be an effective leader, they must understand the inner workings of the organization, including the jokes. A lot of us pass information through jokes.” Therefore, rather than simply influencing faculty, leaders should also allow themselves to be influenced by the group. This is a process where leaders gather the combined capacities of the staff through development of effective relationships and the relation of individuals’ wills to create a powerful united team.

As cultural anthropologists, leaders attempt to deal with issues through exploration of many possible solutions while recognizing the different values and varying opinions. A respondent in writing about reading and writing said,

“every teacher at our site has been involved in a series of in-service workshops to explore how they [sic] can implement reading and writing in the curriculum. The English department has developed a uniform five-trait evaluation process that will be used throughout the building to grade student writing.”

Egalitarian. Co-created leadership invites the very best of every member of the organization. The leadership recognizes that all members of the school community have something to contribute. At the center of these dynamic interactions are those who disagree with the leader. Resistance can be highly instructive. Educators are often challenged that school administrators should strive to become leaders of leaders, wherein they will “work hard to build up the capacities of teachers and others, so that direct leadership will no longer be needed” (Sergiovani, 2000, p. 273). This may be achieved through team building, leadership development and collegiality. Egalitarianism was reported by respondents through the examples of a school where the position of Department Chair was made rotational in an attempt to facilitate more faculty members to take leadership roles. In such cases the results were feelings of connectedness to the

school process by a larger number of faculty and opportunities for infusion of new ideas. In another school, a respondent reported that the new principal extended leadership roles to “those that were originally negative.” These invitations had a positive effect on their attitudes to the extent that their morale was boosted and they started volunteering to take on extra work. In this case, co-created leadership incorporates the elements of McGregor’s Theory Y which requires the widening of the span of control in order to provide greater freedom and opportunities for growth and fulfillment. One respondent called it “cultivating leaders.”

Patience. Organizational change is often a glacial, requiring patience, rather than a volcanic process (Fullan, 1999; 2001). Teachers are may be reluctant to embrace matters of structure, administrative issues, rules, regulations or even group processes for a variety of reasons. Most believe that these are the administrators’ responsibility and are skeptical about promises that leadership will be co-created in their hierarchically organized schools. Teachers’ resistance towards shared decision making (SDM) was found to cast doubts about these realities (Weiss & Cambone, 2000). Weis and Combone found that SDM leaders encouraged creative ideas from teachers and allowed them to take charge, but when new ideas were not forthcoming or they provoked controversy, the administrator became impatient and turned to their own “blue prints.” Such impatience and the return to traditional ways tended to disrupt the accumulation of teachers trust.

It was evident from the respondents that patience is an essential ingredient for success. Patience is needed to “make rational, unemotional decisions.” “I have seen so many fires put out by having the patience to wait instead of being reactionary.” The importance of patience, analogized as “haste makes waste,” was evident in the following respondents reactions: “Rushing through a new policy without giving enough time for discussion prevented the faculty from exploring possible benefits and negatives”; “a program was implemented and soon replaced before the effects were truly realized, leaving the teachers confused and wondering if the plan might have worked,” and “usually her impatience causes the student to shut down, react in a violent manner or be disrespectful.” From these responses it would appear that exercising patience was a challenge, especially when change was gradual. Immediate results were demanded when problems were long-term, while administrators worked short-term. Patient leaders recognize that change is a deliberate, thoughtful, and inclusive process that takes time. Leaders in times of change require patience in order to effectively listen to the organization’s inner voice. In the words of one respondent, “if you are going to let the inner voices be heard, then you have to exercise patience with members of the organization.”

Humility. Humility is born of the leader’s understanding that the wisdom, knowledge, and talents required for the schools’ success do not reside solely within themselves (Murphy, Hunt, & Wasonga, 2004). Humility describes what servant-leadership means - providing leadership in ways that encourage others to be leaders in their own right and making decisions without regard to self-interest (Sergiovanni, 2006). According to Murphy (2000), a humble administrator acknowledges his/her weaknesses and the feelings that those weaknesses engender - forthright and critical self-disclosure on significant job-related issues. “A leader who is unwilling to treat subordinates as colleagues and to share self assessment feelings with them cannot expect shared confidences in return. Without candid exchanges, crucial intelligence will be withheld,

jeopardizing decision making and implementation efforts” (Murphy, 2000, p.120). Great leaders are humble and fearless (Collins, 2001).

Greenleaf (1991) explained that leadership is granted to those who are proven and trusted as servants. Such a leader cannot be too proud of his/her position of leadership. On the contrary, this study indicated that it is more difficult to show humility as leaders want to demonstrate authority, power, resourcefulness, and diligence. Respondents described as “rare moments” when “the leader steps aside and gives credit for success to teachers, even though doing so would show their faith, confidence and respect for teachers. I have seen many principals present teachers’ or teams’ work as their own.” Teachers explained that the school environment is one in which “the principals already have powers and responsibilities; they do not need to make others feel inferior. But that is what they do when all they let us do are routine matters.” However, wherever instances of leaders’ humility were found, they caused people to question prior (negative) beliefs and values, making people more receptive to engagement. One respondent indicated that involvement, productivity and innovation improved since an event in which the principal took blame for the failures of a committee while giving credit to the committee for the successes. This principal has since gained credibility with the staff and the staff is willing to put in more effort, time, and ideas into team work, staff development and leadership. What has been achieved by this principal is captured in Murphy’s (2000, p. 124) writing,

Perhaps it feels less than heroic to help develop a shared vision, to ask questions, to acknowledge weaknesses, to listen carefully, to depend on others, and to let go. Yet, where heroism is concerned, less can be more. To be a lamb is really to be a lion.

Trust and trustworthy. Trust is the essential link between leaders and the led (Evans, 2000, Freire, 1990). Many members of the school community do not always respond to opportunities to be involved and to practice leadership because of the absence of trust and negative experiences with such involvement (Sergiovanni, 2000). Sergiovanni found that trust was built by gently and firmly allowing others to assume leadership roles, and “power to.” People view “Power to ... as a source of energy for achieving shared goals and purposes” (p. 280) and that anyone who is committed to the schools’ goals and purposes can practice “power to.” For trust to be forthcoming, those led must have confidence in the leaders’ competence and values to let go of power. When developing co-created leadership, the leader is not concerned about leadership styles, or who does what. Instead, the leader worries about trust-values and ideals that shape the school as a covenantal community where members take responsibility for leadership.

Trust is not readily given nor easily gained (Murphy, Hunt, & Wasonga, 2004). Studies have emphasized the importance of trust in achieving a positive climate and accomplishing organizational goals (Ouchi, 1981; Fukuyama, 1996). The data indicate that trust was the most powerful but elusive quality of co-created leadership. Trust was earned based on confidentiality and consistency, what is said and done over time. One respondent remarked, “Leaders must follow through on what they say and say what they mean. ‘Double-talk’ destroys trust.” “We do not trust the principal all the time because she has been known to change things that she has said in meetings whenever they are not written.” Trust and trustworthiness are reciprocal. As explained by a respondent, “if you trust the people you work with, and they trust you, you know they will defend and support your decisions in all circumstances.”

These data indicated that trust is not commonly found in schools and the consequences have far reaching implications for school governance and co-created leadership. A trusted leader will be given the mandate to speak on behalf of an organization. The leader's opinions are accepted and respected. On the other hand, a leader who is not trusted will be subjected to constant scrutiny for power, control or sincerity. The lack of trust may be one of the reasons many teachers do not engage in contributing to school leadership. Evans (2000) points out that "when we have come to distrust people, either because they have lied to us or deceived us or let us down too often, we tend to stay suspicious of them, resisting their influence and discounting efforts they may make to reform themselves" (p. 287).

Conclusion

As with the ideals of democracy, co-created leadership may be difficult to achieve, but the dispositions are potentials which may be nurtured, cultivated and practiced by leaders. Although, the co-created school leader invites members of the organization into the leadership dynamic knowing that, "giving away power makes one more powerful, while creating more leaders all around oneself can make one all the more a leader" (Useem, 1998, p. 271), the challenge of co-created leadership is a daunting and daring task. The challenges not only include the ability to invite each members' inner voice, and to tap into every members' ideas and ideals irrespective of their position/creed/color, but also to integrate ideals that are different or not in agreement with the leader. One must be secure enough to make oneself vulnerable. The rewards, however, can reach beyond the limits of distributive and shared leadership models. School leaders have an enormous pool of highly educated and talented members in schools. Recognizing that leadership is the co-creation of the leader and the led promises results that can far exceed those achieved by the leader alone.

Examples of co-created leadership dispositions and efforts were found in schools where leaders focused more attention on informal side of organizations. More studies of co-created leadership are needed in schools. Based on the finding of this study, it is recommended that more seamless, intentional efforts by school leaders are required in order to be inclusive in creating, not sharing the schools they want. Co-created leadership can provide an arena in which a growing leader can be made stronger by the organization and a strong leader can make a weaker organization stronger. The leader is not the only one that has worthy ideas about what is best for the organization; ideas reside in all the members of the organization in terms of their worth, wills and aims. Co-created leadership capitalizes on "growing" people and their ideals for collective ownership.

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