Case Studies on Educational Administration

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Employee behavior in schools and school systems is influenced to a large extent by the power individuals and groups exercise over each other. One of the strongest types of power, and one that has been receiving increasing levels of attention in the past 15 or so years, is referent power. Put simply, referent power is associated with liking or admiring another. For example, a leader may have power to influence others because he or she is perceived by subordinates and peers as a charismatic administrator—an ideal leader.

Interest in referent power has sparked research efforts that have contributed to theory building in the areas of transformational and charismatic leadership. As Yukl (1989) noted, these two terms

... refer to the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of organization members and building commitment for the organization's mission and objectives. Transformational leadership is usually defined more broadly than charismatic leadership, but there is considerable overlap between the two conceptions. (p. 204)

The seminal work of Burns (1978) distinguished between transactional and transformational leadership. The two are seen as somewhat opposite positions of behavior. In reviewing the work of Burns, Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) wrote

Transactional leadership involves an exchange between leader and follower for purposes of achieving individual objectives. For example, a principal may agree to let a teacher attend a national reading conference in
exchange for the teacher's work on a textbook-adoption committee. (p. 233)

Transactional leaders concentrate on the self-interests of subordinates in an attempt to motivate them to do desired things. Bennis and Nanus (1985) concluded that much of the work in organizations is accomplished by this type of interaction between leader and follower.

By contrast, transformational leadership has been described as

...the pursuit of higher-level goals that are common to both leader and followers. There are two components to transformational leadership: (1) It elevates the motives of individuals toward a common goal. (2) It focuses on higher-order, intrinsic, and moral motives. (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 233)

Transformational leadership is concerned with vision and culture. Change in schools, for example, is attempted by appealing to the professional commitment of teachers.

In this case, four teachers discuss the leadership behavior of a new principal. What becomes obvious is that the new principal is almost the complete opposite of her predecessor. Some of these differences are readily apparent (e.g., gender, experience), but others are more subtle. As you read the case, concentrate on trying to understand why these four teachers hold their respective views. Also try to relate the discussion to your personal experiences. Do either of these principals resemble administrators with whom you have been associated?

KEY AREAS FOR REFLECTION

1. Principal succession and the ability to create change
2. Teacher expectations of principal behavior
3. Various types of power and how they are used by leaders
4. The importance of culture and climate in relation to leadership behavior
5. Communication processes in schools
6. The importance of moral, professional, and ethical issues in transformational leadership

THE CASE

As Peter Weller walked into the teachers' lounge, there was a sudden silence. Only three teachers were in the room, and they were seated together at one of the small round tables placed randomly in the room. He looked at each of them hoping that someone would break the silence.
Finally he asked, “Okay, what’s going on here? You guys look like you just got caught doing something terribly wrong.”

Debra Lowler, Linda Mays, Jake Brumwell—the three teachers in the room—and Peter all had their preparation period during the second hour of the school day. Over the course of the year, they got to know each other quite well. It had become customary for them to convene for coffee—usually during the last 15 minutes of their preparation period.

“Peter,” Linda answered, “We didn’t know it was you. We were just discussing your favorite principal. Maybe she has a bug in this room and sent you in here to defend her! Just a joke, Peter, so don’t get hostile.”

Peter just smiled and walked over to the table with the coffeepot; he filled his cup and sat down with the others.

“Don’t you people have better things to discuss? Now I realize that teachers just love to criticize principals. But come on now, let’s ease up on Dr. Werner.”

Colleen Werner became principal of Drewerton South High School less than a year ago. The school is only 14 years old and enrolls 1,050 students in a middle-class suburban community. She is only the second person to hold this administrative position at the school.

George Calbo, Dr. Werner’s predecessor, retired a year ago. He is a tall man, approximately 6’5”, whose presence is immediately noticed when he walks into a room. Prior to being named the first principal at South, he taught physical education and coached basketball at Drewerton Central (which was the only high school in the district at the time). Many of the teachers at South admired and respected him. He had a way of keeping everybody happy. He found ways to work out problems; he was a master at reaching compromises.

The selection of Colleen Werner to be the next principal at Drewerton South shocked many on the faculty. She and George Calbo were obviously very different. She was somewhat introverted, she came from the East Coast, she had just earned a Ph.D., and she was quite young—only 32 years old. Whereas George would spend much of his time walking the halls and talking to teachers in the lounge, Colleen was more apt to schedule her days in meticulous fashion. Whereas George was prone to make all the big decisions, Colleen delegated much of the managerial functions of the school to her two assistant principals. When George went to a football or basketball game, he made sure everyone knew he was there. He would walk through the stands shaking hands and slapping people on their backs. Colleen went to games, but you would really have to look to find her. She maintained a low profile, but she was always friendly to those who tried to engage her in conversation.

Peter Weller often found himself defending Dr. Werner during the coffee sessions with his three colleagues. He really didn’t mind doing so, because he truly believed that she was an exceptional leader. He admired her courage to be the type of principal she wanted to be; he admired her professional approach to dealing with the faculty and the public; and he appreciated her candidness about the school and what needed to be done in the future.
"Well, what are you crucifying her for today?" Peter asked.

"Come on Peter," Jake answered. "You know we have to talk about somebody, and it might as well be Colleen."

"No, you talk about her almost every day. She's become an obsession for you three," Peter noted.

Debra Lowler, who is usually the person in the group with the least to say, spoke next. "I'll tell you what bothers me about her. It's those repeated comments about how we should be professionals, about why we should always do things for the kids, and about how we should be willing to volunteer for this and that. We never got any of that nonsense from George. He knew the score. He was a teacher for many years before becoming a principal. He had his feet on the ground."

"Yes," Linda chimed in, "George fought for teachers' rights. He made sure we got paid for doing extra things. He didn't want teachers to be abused."

"Don't you think that Colleen cares about people?" Peter asked. "Don't you think she wants to do what's best for students and faculty? Just because she doesn't go around praising everyone every minute of the day doesn't mean she's indifferent or cold."

Jake Brumwell teaches mathematics and coaches track and cross-country. In the group, he is probably Dr. Werner's biggest critic. Jake's age, 51, and his close relationship with the former principal are probably factors that contribute to his negative attitude toward her.

"Peter, this principal still has a lot to learn," Jake said. "She especially has a lot to learn about people and about getting things done. Just last week, for example, she called me into her office and asked if I would be willing to take a group of students camping in June. These are the kids that she has put in this special program—you know, the ones who are likely to quit school. She has already gotten two other teachers to agree to volunteer for this weekend camping trip, and she wants to know if I'll go too. So, I ask her how much I would get paid. And she looks at me like I'm crazy. She says that it is something we are doing for the kids. She's going to pay for the van and the food, but that's all. So, I tell her I'm busy that weekend. I just don't like being put in these positions where I have to say no and end up looking like a bad guy."

Peter responded very quickly, "Did you know, Jake, that I'm one of those who volunteered?" Not waiting for an answer, he asked another question. "Did you know that Colleen, herself, was going to go? So, it wasn't like she was asking you to do something that she wasn't doing herself."

Debra came to Jake's defense. "Sure, she's going. But she's on a 12-month contract. We're not."

"But she's not paid for working on weekends, is she?" Peter shot back.

Linda entered the conversation again. "Look, it's more than just asking us to give up our time. Colleen's whole approach toward running South High is very different—she doesn't do things the way George Calbo did them. I guess the best way to put it is that George was always looking out for us. He cared that teachers received fair compensation for what they did. He wasn't going to let
anyone take advantage of us. It seems that Colleen only cares about the students—and the worse the students are, the more she seems to care about them. She's obsessed with saving lost causes. Now we all recognize that this is noble, but can she be a good principal if this is all she cares about?"

"Yeah, maybe if she tried to make us as happy as she tries to make the kids, she would be a lot better off," Jake added. "Personally, I think it would be better for her to pay attention to the best students. They are the ones who ought to be receiving special trips. What kinds of messages are sent to the kids when the very worst students, the troublemakers, are the ones who get all of the principal's attention?"

Peter was visibly frustrated by what he was hearing. He had been teaching for nearly 15 years, and it was at times like these that he reached back to remember why he had become a teacher in the first place.

"You three realize, don't you, that there are many teachers here at South who support Colleen and her leadership style?" Peter asked rhetorically. "It's not as if everybody thinks she is a disaster. Why don't you give her credit for some of the things she has accomplished in just a short period of time? What about her work with Deloris Hutchins?"

Deloris Hutchins taught home economics, and students and teachers at South viewed her to be one of the worst teachers at the school. Dr. Werner made Deloris her pet project during the first year of her principalship. She personally spent time helping her to improve her planning and instructional strategies. In return, Deloris has become one of Dr. Werner's primary supporters.

Peter answered his own question. "You know and I know that George Calbo simply protected Deloris. He didn't care whether she became a better teacher. He just wasn't going to let anyone touch one of 'his' teachers. That's all he cared about. Why didn't he raise concern about Deloris's students? Why didn't he help her become a better instructor instead of just making excuses for her poor performance? Ask Deloris whether Colleen is a good principal. Ask her which principal really cared about helping her. She told me a week ago that Dr. Werner is the best administrator she has ever known. She said that Colleen has helped her become a better teacher. To say that Colleen doesn't care about teachers is a lot of nonsense."

Jake replied to Peter, "See, that's what I was trying to say a minute ago. No matter whether it's teachers or students, she seems to care only about those who are doing poorly. What about some 'perks' for those of us who do a good job day after day. What do we get? I'll tell you. We get to give up a weekend to supervise a bunch of rowdies out in the woods! And if we say no, we're suddenly uncaring teachers, insensitive human beings. I don't like the way this administrator operates; and I'll say again, she's not ready for a job like this."

Peter recognized that he was not going to gain any converts today. There had been many previous conversations like this one; although everyone leaves with the same convictions, they all seem to feel better having had the opportunity to vent their feelings. Strangely, the 15- to 20-minute daily debates seem to strengthen the bond among the four teachers.
“Well, colleagues,” Peter said as he stood up, “time to get back to work. But before I do, I just wanted to let you know one last time that you are all wrong about Colleen. Give her a chance. She’s a bright, energetic leader. Maybe she’s not perfect, but who is?”

“Oh Peter,” Linda said, “wipe that smile off your face. Don’t you recognize when you have lost an argument. After all, three of us can’t be wrong!”

“We all know that women are more flexible leaders,” Debra interjected.

Jake now was smiling too, and he shot back, “Says who?”

“I say so,” Debra answered sarcastically. “I’ve got scientific evidence. Seriously, maybe Colleen will see the light and become more like George Calbo. She is bright, and I think she really wants to do the right things. Let’s give Peter credit for one good suggestion. Maybe we should give her more time before we declare her a lost cause.”

The group always had a way of ending their discussions with a little humor. Maybe it was their way of assuring that no one’s feelings were hurt.

Jake had the last word as the teachers left the lounge. “First thing you should learn, Debra, is that you never tell Peter he’s right about anything. After all, we’re his only friends and we have make sure that his overactive ego remains under control.”

The four teachers laughed as they scattered down different hallways to their next classes.

THE CHALLENGE

Utilize your knowledge of leadership and organizational behavior to analyze the discussion that took place. Specifically, provide an explanation of why teachers in this school react to Dr. Werner so differently.

KEY ISSUES/QUESTIONS

1. Is it common for teachers in a school to have differing role expectations for a principal? What evidence do you have to support your response?

2. In the case, a charge is made that Dr. Werner spends an inordinate amount of her time trying to assist students and teachers experiencing problems. Assuming this is an accurate observation, are you troubled by that fact?

3. Compare and contrast legitimate, expert, and referent power. Based on the conversation held by the four teachers, can you make any judgments about the forms of power used by the past and present principals?

4. Succession in the principalship is a topic receiving added attention in the literature. Why is there growing interest in this topic?

5. What factors are associated with a new principal’s ability to bring about significant change in a school?
6. Identify several theories that focus on transformational or charismatic leadership. Discuss the primary facets of these theories.

7. To what extent do the personal values and beliefs of teachers influence their judgments about school administrators?

8. One argument frequently made in collective bargaining is that teachers should not be expected to do "extra" work without additional compensation. In part, this position is predicated on the belief that teachers are not adequately compensated in the first place. What is your personal position on this matter?

9. What is your image of an ideal principal? What characteristics, skills, knowledge, and so forth, would this person possess?

10. Principals are involved in a wide range of duties. These include such responsibilities as managerial tasks (e.g., facility management, budgets), instructional leadership (e.g., developing new courses, working with teachers), student supervision (e.g., discipline), organizational tasks (e.g., scheduling), and public relations (e.g., being a representative of the school to the community). In general, which of these duties most influences teachers' perceptions of a principal?

11. Assume that you are seeking a position as assistant principal. Would you like to work for Dr. Werner? Why or why not?

12. Do you believe that Dr. Werner tries to lead by example? Why or why not?

13. What is meant by the symbolic nature of the principalship?

14. Is it more feasible for a new principal to set a vision and bring others to accept that vision or to reach a new vision democratically by building consensus over time?

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


