The Principal as a Team Leader with a Vision for Improving School Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the critical role of the principal as team leader. To pursue a higher school performance within the changing environment, the school requires principals who are able to provide effective educational leadership and decision making. Having a vision is an essential part of quality leadership for principals and this is discussed in order to align all the school efforts to achieve school objectives. Strategies to create an effective vision are explored, and participative management as an alternative strategy is examined to empower school organisational members to perform effectively toward the achievement of improved quality in teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: principal, team leadership, vision, participative management

INTRODUCTION

The new changes of the school environment that influence the school organisation are evident in advances in technology, increase in school competitors, higher community demands for better education systems, high performing schools, and higher student outcomes. Schools as organisations require effective leadership from their school leaders to empower the school staff to deal with changing environment. The need for effective leadership at school level has attracted international attention [1] particularly at the level of education policy. It continues to become an important component underpinning school effectiveness. Principals as school leaders are expected to develop and sustain strategies for building capacity in terms of change [2-4].

Principals require high skills in implementing effective leadership that is able to empower the whole school staff in order to sustain the school organisation within the changing environment. School organisations thus need principals who are able to employ effective leadership with a “vision” [5, 6] to empower their team members to succeed through providing instructional and administrative services for students, parents, and community.

This article highlights (1) the emerging needs of effective leadership in the changing global context of education; (2) school principals as team leaders who have a vision for the instructional improvement; (3) and (4) creating an effective vision; (4) inviting the staff, and leader to focus on the vision; and (3) strategies to build an effective team for the school organisation

The emerging needs of effective leadership in the changing global context of education

Global competition is engulfing most aspects of organisational efforts all over the world to pursue the highest level of nation building programs especially in the development of technology, economics, and education [7, 8]. Schools as organisations confront this challenge and require a capacity to deal with such demands. While the situation may demand that the school as a part of public organisations to employ strict controls and increase work efficiency to survive, this may also cause the devaluation of employees as human capital. Many countries, thus, are concerned that the role of the principal today is becoming more complex [9]. The existing demands to the model of school leadership are more complicated than the model that was practised in the last half century. Pont, Nusche and Moorman [10] contend that in the 21st century, school principals are challenged with a huge number of educational leadership responsibilities, even in these countries where the distributed and collaborative approach to leadership have been introduced for some time.

The new paradigm of education management that has been adopted in many countries reflects organisational re formations that focus on decentralization, autonomy, and specifically school based-

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management [11]. To deal with the context of the reformations, the leadership function exercised by the principal is extremely important for the school improvement [12]. Principals have to be able to manage the change, build organisational capacity, and initiate the utilization of the technological advances in order to increase school effectiveness and successfully attain higher school performance in terms of student learning outcomes [9].

The success of a school organisation in responding to this competitive situation, then, not only depends on material aspects such as money, technology, equipment, buildings or other assets, but on the successful management and leadership of human factors within the school system. The reason for the focus on the human factor is that the school needs people such as teachers, students, and parent in order to operate the organisational activities of the school system. The members of the school organisation cannot be replaced by other organisational components, not even with a very sophisticated machine. This is particularly true when the school as an organisation involves empowering all its members to obtain their highest potential to perform better for the benefit of the school as a public organisation. This argument is consistent with many studies and the literature in management and leadership area that concludes that effective leadership of the human resources is vital for organisational success [13, 14].

Thus, the leadership approaches that are required today are more focused on how the school empowers its human resources through team leadership; how the principal works with people and optimizes the contribution from all the stakeholders to bring success in attaining higher school performance within changing context. This article highlights the role of the principal as team leader with a vision that could be employed in the empowerment of the human resources in the school organisation. The discussion is focused on how the leadership roles of a principal contribute to the improvement of school performance.

School principals as team leaders who have a vision for instructional improvement

School principals occupy a key position in the schooling system. Principal as leaders in their school organisations are not only challenged on how to accomplish routine administrative tasks, but on how they carry out the functions of effective leadership for improving the quality of teaching and learning [15]. They undertake the numerous responsibilities or functions within the diverse roles as a school executive. Odhiambo and Hii [11] listed four key areas of a principal’s responsibility in achieving quality teaching and learning as perceived by the stakeholders. These include: maintaining a vision for the school’s future, (2) supplying adequate resources for teachers to carry out their jobs effectively, (3) evaluating and providing feedback for teachers, and (4) improving student achievement.

These functions, exercised as multiple roles played by the principal, determine the success of school improvement endeavour. Much of the literature on school effectiveness suggests that the role as a team leader is an essential ingredient in creating and maintaining effective school management for implementing the principal jobs [15]. Through team leadership, a principal helps teachers to develop mutual support and trust as they work together to establish a successful school. However, principals alone cannot carry out their jobs effectively. They need help, and are responsible jointly with staff for school improvement [16]. A few examples for building the effective leadership through team leadership activities are suggested by Sergiovanni [15] as important strategies in providing support mechanisms for the principal. These included team teaching, team administration, and shared decision making, and delegation.

Viewing the essence of effective leadership for successful organisations [17], within an effective team leadership, school principals as managers or leaders still have a substantial contribution to the success of a school system. However, their contribution is contingent upon the principals’ capacity to manage the organisational members of the school system in the global market. Bass [17] and Key [18] also highlight that the ability of the school organisation to respond to a changing environment depends on the ability to employ management and leadership styles appropriately. Many studies in management and leadership have demonstrated that executives of public organisations need to provide an effective role as team leaders who have a vision, in order to leverage their staff and empower them to achieve organisational objectives, and contribute to the success of the mission of the organisation as a whole [13, 18].

The construct of a vision

It is argued in this article that to perform effectively as team leaders, principals need to have a clear vision underpinning their school organisation. The term “vision” has various meanings. Organisations sometime use this term with varying interpretations which are mixed up with organisational objectives, goals, mission, and slogans. To avoid any ambiguous concept of vision, Yukl [13] suggests that a compelling and enduring vision
usually requires something more than a bland mission statement, a slogan, values, or objectives. The mission represents an organisational purpose related to the activities offered to clients. The vision usually informs what the organisation does, justifying why it is worthwhile and exiting to do[13]. He added that successful vision makes the mission statement comes alive, encourages organisational members to work and stimulates their creativity to achieve the organisation’s mission.

Stoner et al.[5] describes the construct of the vision as containing three elements. The first element is a construct that consists of significant purpose explaining the “why” of the organisation, and what it can do for the clients. The second element of vision is a picture of the future, representing a mental image of what the organisation can become. Third element contains clear values. The values can be used as guidelines on how people work in pursuing the organisation’s objectives and achieving its future. Principals can create a school vision by addressing this description and using it as starting point for working towards school improvement.

Following the work of Blanchard “Leading at a Higher Level” [5], this article highlights some concepts or hints for creating and customizing in a school organisation.

The essence of vision in leadership
Stoner et al. [5] explain why leaders need a vision in their leadership role:

“… leadership is about going somewhere. If you and your people don’t know where you are going, your leadership doesn’t matter.”

Vision is vital for educational leaders who can use it as a guideline to integrating the diverse roles and functions of the school organisational members in improving the school performance [19]. Within the context of a self-managing school under market conditions, as identified by Caldwell and Spinks [20], a principal must be able to characterize his/her leadership role with a vision to improve the quality of instructional strategy for teachers, and learning capability for students. Without vision a principal is not able to incorporate the efforts of all the organisational members to achieve school objectives. Transformational leadership, which has been offered by some scholars as a new leadership approach, has not provided strong evidence [1, 11] of its contribution to the improvement in the core functioning of the school system, and its quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, there is plentiful literature and research focusing on democratic models such as collaborative and distributed leadership, but this, too, has not provided clear links to improved student outcomes [21]. This is due to the fact that implementation of these leadership models is not complemented with a vision focusing on the improvement of the core instructional areas, involving the daily academic activities of students and teachers [2]. In this sense, visions of this type miss the core point of education. Without this focus, a school’s vision misses the whole point of education.

The principal as leader must be able to invite all the school organisational members to shoot for excellence for his or her school success. Although the impact of principal’s leadership is mediated by a number of other factors [6], many studies have found that leadership focusing on excellence of instruction and school organisational improvement has a positive impact on improving student outcomes [22]. The effectiveness of leadership roles in these two core areas, then, can be perceived as the main predictors of leadership contribution to the achievement of higher school performance [11]. To ensure that the leadership of principals substantially contributes to the improvement of the school performance, the school vision they create should include the domains of instruction and learning outcomes.

Creating an effective vision
Team leadership implies an approach to leadership where leaders work with people, and get assistance from others. The principal as leader works with the whole school staff. This may include teachers, students, and parents. The principal should involve these people to provide information, ideas and arguments in the formulation of the vision statement. Without incorporating the input from the team members, the vision will not function properly, and the staff is unlikely to be concerned with the current problems. In addition, to create an effective vision through team leadership, a principal needs to have a broad understanding about the school organisation including its objectives, school operations and services, school resources, and environment. Using guidelines for developing a good vision advocated by Yukl [13], a principal can develop a vision for his or her school organisation through following the five steps discussed below.

Involve the school stakeholders
In order to develop a shared vision which enjoy broad support from people, the principal needs to involve the stakeholders to refine the key ideas into a vision. The stakeholders may include parents, student representatives, school board members, and other community members who are affiliated to the school. This
Identify school objectives
The principal as a leader in the school organisation can begin this step by chairing a meeting with the people discussed above as stakeholders. This step is followed by inviting people to share ideas about the school objectives that need to be established collaboratively. The next step is to discuss the shared values that can be used as the basis for generating a school vision with wide appeal.

Identify relevant elements found in the school history
Some elements from the current history and values of the school can be used as the basis for developing a new vision. Even when existing conditions demand systematic school reforms, some values that have been used in the school environment are probably still useful as worthy assets of the school organisation. Thus, they should be regarded as the base on which ideas to build an effective vision. The principal can initiate this stage by sharing ideas with the entire school staff members and the community members that are involved in the school improvement program.

Link the vision to the school competencies and evaluate its credibility
To make the vision realistic, the principal must link the vision to the core competencies of the school, exploring whether the school has adequate human resources with the skills needed to implement school programs and activities toward the vision. Are there sufficient facilities (hard and soft resources) to support the program’s implementation? Teachers and other school representatives are sceptical when a vision is not realistic or unlikely to be attained, particularly when they find that the school does not have sufficient resources to run the new programs.

To respond to changes in the school environment usually requires a noble vision which becomes a strategic guideline for all members to follow in the effort to achieve organisational objectives. To ensure that the vision works effectively in the school system, it is important to ensure that all the school members understand this vision, and believe in their own capability to work for the vision. If necessary, the principal needs to provide guidance and train people to enhance their skills to achieve the vision.

Continually assess and refine the vision
To be effective within the school system, a vision needs continuous assessment. Yukl [13] describes the development of a vision as an interactive process. Within this process, the vision progresses from strategy to action. This is not a simple task for organisational leaders such as principals. By examining the performance of the vision as it progresses, the principals and their staff can improve the quality of the vision. The metaphor, symbols, and slogans related to the vision are assessed to see whether they effectively capture the essence of the vision. If necessary, new ideas can be generated for refining the current vision, in order to achieve ongoing improvement.

Finally, the most important thing is that a good working vision is realized by employing clear short statements, using common language to make people easily understand it. A good statement of vision contains the three elements explained previously (purpose, picture of the future, clear values). It must function in an alignment with the organisational directions in which people work together towards the same target. “The vision provides guidance for daily decisions so that people are aiming at the right target, not working at cross-purposes with each other” [5].

Inviting the staff to focus on the vision
The vision is not created as a statement that is framed and hung on the wall. As mentioned previously, the messages in the vision reflects the conceptualization of the future of the organisation, and used as the guideline for running the mission of the organisation, and integrating the diversity of the jobs within the organisational structure. To make the vision effectively contribute to the organisational performance, school leaders regularly invite their members to talk it, to understand it, and encourage them to focus their attention on the vision. A strategic way to keep the vision alive is, for principals as leaders to show commitment to the vision in their daily activities. The staff members are then encouraged to focus on the school vision while they are engaged in the organisational activities.

Strategies to build an effective team for the school organisation
Running an institution such as a school needs a team of people who work collaboratively to attain the organisational objectives. Carew et al. [23] suggest that most of the time spent by organisational members is
working in the team setting. The changing environment needs a responsive strategy from within the school organisation. The changes include advances in technology, school competitors, community demands for better education systems, high performing schools, and high student outcome mentioned earlier. To deal with these challenges, school leaders need an effective team to diagnose the condition, explore the new strategies, make better decisions, and initiate the feasible programs [23] to improve the school performance.

The team that is not able to cope with the challenges of the situation will fail to bring the organisation to attain a higher level of performance. Reflecting on what is suggested by Carew et al. [23], there are some reasons why a school team may not be effective. These include the lack of the clarity of the school objectives; unfamiliarity of the team members with the interdependency of tasks; lack of mutual accountability and norms that foster creativity; lack of planning, management support, resources and skill training for individuals; and inability to deal with conflict.

To develop an effective team, there are several strategies that can be adopted at the team level [23]. These include:

**Purpose and values**
The principal develops a common team purpose that is aligned with the school purpose, and formulates clear school goals and standards.

**Empowerment**
The principal needs to employ leadership practices that encourage participation and risk taking.

**Communication**
The principal encourages different perspectives from the staff members, provides open feedback, and discusses ways in which they can work effectively as team members.

**Flexibility**
To support the effectiveness of team work, the school leader needs to employ situational management approaches, shared leadership, and continuous staff training.

**Productivity**
The principal should encourage team members to fulfil their duties according to school goals and standards. Progress then needs to be monitored and alternatives explored in order to solve the problems that may be encountered in the way the team works.

**Recognition, appreciation, and morale**
The principal should also promote the work motivation of the whole school staff members by recognizing achievements obtained by the staff members, and increase their morale by recognizing their contribution to the organisational success.

**The principles of participative leadership**
In addition to the principles discussed above, many studies have found that the effectiveness of the team depends on a leadership model used to foster the creativity of the team members. Since empowerment is the key for successful team building in the changing environment [23], this article highlights a leadership model, namely participative management, which empowers people at work. The participative management style or it is interchangeably called in many literature sources as “participative leadership” [13] is considered one of the strategic ways to build an effective team by fostering self autonomy engaged in the team works[24]. It is generally defined as an approach that empowers team members by means of distributing information, knowledge, rewards, and authority to the lower level of organisation [18, 24, 25]. Key [18] highlighted this as a managerial approach focusing on the employees as individual, and the importance of fostering their contributions for the attainment of organisational success. The team members are well trained and prepared, enabling them to participate actively in the attainment of organisational goals. At the core of the participative leadership model, there is a shift of power from the top to the lower level hierarchies to provide a climate where subordinates are involved in decision making and its implementation [26].

Scholars supporting the application of this model argue that participative management enables organisations to survive within the unpredictable environments through human resource empowerment. At the same time it satisfies organisational members by fulfilling basic human needs and their expectations [24]. Thus, this model is vital for principals in order to strengthen school management and to stay competitive even in the changing environment.
To design a favourable organisational environment, principals as managers need to consider the individual characteristics of staff, including their talents, motivation, values, ethics, as well as organisational contingency factors as well as leadership culture, work design, and the extent of management trust in the workplace [27]. This participative management model is able to maximize the use of the human resources if these factors are well-considered. This is in line with social identity and self-categorization principles, which suggest that organisational leaders require participative approaches to management in order to provide opportunities for collective self-actualization and self-enhancement while at the same time increasing organisational performance [28].

Many studies have concluded that that when team members are encouraged to take on and accomplish goals or work autonomously they perform better, especially in achieving high performance goals. Consistent with the general theoretical framework provided by social identity and self-categorization theories, it can be argued that a key reason for this is that when goals are participative decided upon and not imposed, their attainment is more likely to provide opportunities for collective self-actualization and self-improvement. As a result, goals are more likely to be accepted and internalized [28, 29]. This supports the essence of participative management in designing organisational autonomy to increase the contributions of the team members toward the achievements of the school vision.

Conclusion

The new formations in the school environment challenge a principal as an executive within the organisational structure. To deal with the changing environment, a school organisation needs to build an effective team to pursue a higher level of organisational performance. In order to incorporate all efforts toward the school objectives, a school organisation needs a principal who has a vision. The vision should be established addressing the core domains of the school performance indicators including quality of the teaching for teachers and learning capability for students. Without a vision reflecting these components, school organisations are unlikely to be successful as expected by stakeholders. To obtain a broad support from the community, the school principal needs to create a shared vision in order to align organisational efforts to achieve school objectives.

Finally, to improve and sustain the effectiveness of the team leadership, the principal needs to empower the human factors in the organisation. Participative management is considered an appropriate model of leadership that can be employed by a principal for this strategy. This leadership encourages self autonomy for the organisational members and fosters their motivation to work collaboratively to obtain a higher level of school performance.

REFERENCES


