

Show Me the Resources: Teachers' Perceptions of Educational Leader Responsibilities

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Effective communication between educational leaders and those with whom they work is of utmost importance. Bolman and Deal's (2003) leadership and organizational frames provide a valuable paradigm for educational leaders as they strive to engage teachers in relevant and meaningful ways. This study draws upon responses generated from two sets of teacher interviews conducted with early adopters and laggards (Rogers, 1973). While both teacher groups spoke toward the relevance of all four Bolman and Deal frames, they overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of the human resource frame. Greater awareness of teacher expectations from the human resource frame enhances interaction with educational leaders working to increase student achievement.

Keywords: organizational theory, Bolman and Deal four frame model, leadership theory

As educational leaders strive for effective communication and engagement with educators, varying expectations can undermine on their efforts. While leadership texts and administrator programs provide valuable conceptual frameworks, these paradigms may sometimes be disconnected from the realities of the educators with whom they work. It is therefore critical for leaders to consider how teacher perceptions of the administrator's role and responsibilities may differ from their own.

Organizational and leadership theories provides a variety of paradigms through which educational leaders frame their roles and responsibilities. Specifically, Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames provide a model that guides educational leaders regarding the structural, political, human resource or symbolic nature of their positions. These frames help leaders understand primary tasks, as well as important considerations for building a vibrant culture and climate while responding to teacher concerns. The implications of these organizational models also aid more effective implementation of educational reform.

This qualitative study drew upon teacher interviews to identify their perceptions of primary responsibilities for educational leaders. The overwhelming schedule of educational leaders (Fitzwater, 1996; Hall & Hord, 2011) makes it difficult to inquire and understand the experience of teachers. Since teachers are the primary individuals affecting student achievement, leaders do well to understand their perceptions as clearly as possible (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). If classroom teachers see the task of educational leaders differently, this can create frustration and discord in the educational process.

Background

Organizational theorists provide essential conceptual frameworks for any leader. Organizational paradigms can significantly influence the culture and climate of large, and small, group interaction with co-workers. While working through my own administrator preparation program, this researcher found merit with Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frame model. This model provided a helpful conceptual framework for educational leaders and emphasized the importance of integrating each frame.

Yet while reading Bolman and Deal (2003) along with other organizational theorists (Northouse, 2004; Senge, 1990; Waters et al., 2006), this researcher began to see a disparity between conversations in class and the reality among teachers. The primary discussions around administrative responsibilities at times did not meet the expectations of educators in the classroom. One goal of my subsequent doctoral research (Snyder, 2017) was to help bridge this gap.

Teacher voice is gaining momentum as a field of educational research (Gurley et al., 2016; Mette et al., 2016; Quaglia & Lande, 2017). This qualitative data-gathering method provides rich description from those who work with students all day, every day. While the motives behind generating teacher voice can be mixed, it is certain that educational leaders do well to consider the sentiments of those who have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to provide voice to teachers and in so doing, provide insight for educational leaders. Qualitative interviews with teachers provided data which when sifted through Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames clarified teacher expectations for the leaders with whom they worked. For educational leaders striving to move forward with an understanding of those they lead, this information is highly valuable.

Literature Review

Organizational and leadership theories provide numerous philosophical considerations and practical paradigms through which leaders view their interactions with individuals in the organization. Since leaders and members within an organization may consciously, or unconsciously, view their organization through different lenses, it is crucial to identify these paradigms. Inadequate identification of organizational paradigms can lead to miscommunication, mixed motives, and muddled roles. In the context of this research project, clarification of organizational paradigms opens the door for more effective interaction with workers.

Bolman and Deal (originally published in 1991; now in its 6th edition - 2017) provided four “frames” through which one might view an organization: structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Recent applications of this model for institutional analysis, leadership, and change, included studies in library science (Novak & Day, 2015; Sowell, 2014), pharmacy programs (Thompson et al., 2008), university planning, departmental, and interdepartmental work (Lindahl, 2013; Roth & Elrod, 2015; Stephenson, 2010) and community college administration (Sypawka et al., 2010). Even while complexity and critical theories address a wider range of leadership and organizational issues, authors from those fields recognized the validity of Bolman and Deal’s (2003) multiple-frame approach (Moen, 2017; Shoup, 2016). Further consideration of each frame will add a richer understanding of their implications for leadership roles and structuring the responses of teachers.

The Structural Frame

The structural frame identifies organizations as factories or machines, the goal of which is to run smoothly. Key concepts in this frame include rules, roles, goals, policies and environment. Essential tasks for leaders in the structural frame include defining roles, establishing proper structures, communicating goals and keeping members aligned to the overall vision. As “social architects,” leaders design appropriate responses to change in the environment, culture, or market (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The structural frame tends to view organizations as rational systems. Leaders can implement changes in a predictable fashion while adapting their organization to the evolving conditions around them (Graetz & Smith, 2010; Kezar, 2001).

The tendency to view the educational endeavor from the structural frame became increasingly popular during the first half of the 20th Century. Callahan (1962) explained how the scientific management model of Frederick Taylor gained popularity as Progressives sought greater accountability in social organizations. School administrators bought into Taylor’s model in an effort to increase efficiency and produce measurable standards for constituents. In what Callahan (1962) referred to as a “Tragedy in American Education,” he concluded that educational questions became subordinate to business considerations, schools produced non-educationally minded administrators, practices received scientific labels in spite of not being very scientific, and an anti-intellectual climate was fostered and encouraged among educators. This application of the ‘cult of efficiency’ method to the world of education epitomizes the structural frame.

The structural frame, like all four organizational frames, provides its own perspective from which to interpret barriers to change (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Structural frame barriers to change generally relate to a loss of clarity and stability. Individuals may resist because they do not understand their role, or their changing role creates a level of discomfort. In order to help

organization members adapt to change and respond to resistance, leaders need to establish or reestablish policies, and clarify patterns of interaction.

Many contemporary educational leaders prescribe similarly rational, efficient processes of the structural model for implementing change and dealing with resistance. Hall and Hord (2011) suggest that leaders design innovation configurations, identify stages of concern for individuals affected by initiatives, measure levels of use, and leverage techniques of various intervention strategies to predictably and rationally implement change. Fullan (2011) similarly purports that focusing on capacity building (rather than accountability), group quality (rather than individual quality), systemic initiatives (rather than fragmented efforts), and instruction (rather than technology) will result in effective implementation of reform initiatives. These structural frame models emphasize specific, leader-driven strategies that will predictably result in desired organizational change.

The Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame sees organizations as families that focus on needs and relationships within the family (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Since organizations are comprised of individuals, the needs of those individuals must be central in the goals of the organization. If individuals are growing, nurtured, and learning, their health and welfare will extend to the entire organization. Conversely, if managers overlook the welfare of individuals, then the overall purpose of the organization will suffer. Leaders in the human resource frame must focus on individual empowerment while they align human and organizational needs.

Bolman and Deal (2003) recognize that leaders may deal with individuals in the human resource frame considerably different. Drawing upon Argyris and Schon's (2003) Theory for Action, Bolman and Deal (2003) distinguish a very self-centered model from an others-centered model. Argyris and Schon's (2003) *Model I* leaders begin with the assumption that organizational problems or resistance exist within particular individuals. Though still focused on the individual, leaders assume that certain individuals are the source of their organizational problems. Leaders need to identify these people, and then pressure them to change. *Model II* leaders, on the other hand, focus on the potential within individuals to meet mutual goals and influence. Advocacy and inquiry are part of leaders' responsibilities along with dialogue and open communication (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Argyris and Schon's (2003) models clarify that even while operating under the umbrella of the human resource frame, leaders can have fundamentally different attitudes toward an individual.

Human resource barriers to change include anxiety, uncertainty and the tendency for people to feel inadequate (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Rather than focusing on the efficient operation of the organization, leaders need to provide training, build capacity and assure psychological support. Since individuals may cope differently to various initiatives, leaders need to recognize, and adapt to, this differentiation (Graetz & Smith, 2010).

The Political Frame

Bolman and Deal's (2003) political frame sees organizations as jungles in which leaders must govern politics and organize power. Since time and resources are limited, members within this frame see conflict as an inherent component of any organization. Effective leaders identify the "arenas" in which power struggles occur, and plan their strategies accordingly. Leaders must focus

on building coalitions and maintaining the high ground in order to accomplish their agenda (Graetz & Smith, 2010). Stemming from the Hegelian dialectic, and Marxist ideology, organizational behavior in this frame is frequently viewed as irrational and erratic (Kezar, 2001).

Political frame barriers to change include lack of power and the ongoing conflict between winners and losers (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Organization members will resist directly proportional to the extent to which they perceive new initiatives as a threat to their own agenda or interests. Leaders are put in a position of constant power plays, negotiation, and compromise in order to “win” their desired agenda. Conflict theorists would recognize the legitimacy of many of these realities in the political frame.

The Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame sees organizations as unique cultures or ceremonies in which leaders must provide meaning and create faith (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Key concepts in this frame include metaphor, ritual, storytelling and hero-making. Typical activities like meetings, evaluations and bargaining serve as theaters in which rituals are played out for the sake of the organization. Leaders must inspire organization members by meaning-making, connecting with the past, and providing powerful transitions to the future.

Symbolic frame barriers to change are based upon clinging to the past or losing meaning and purpose (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Those resistant to change may be overly vested in the comfort and relative success with the way things have always been done. Leaders need to create transition rituals that legitimize past accomplishments while simultaneously celebrating the future (Bolman & Deal, 2010).

A Multi-Frame Approach

The centerpiece of Bolman and Deal’s (2003) work is the need for leaders to practice a multi-frame approach in their organization. Some instances may necessitate defining roles and structures more clearly. Other initiatives may require the human resource sensitivity to individuals or the symbolic recognition of accomplishments. Implementing change may require building political alliances and leveraging relationships. Organizational leaders must understand the nuances of all four frames in order to be effective and knowledgeable about the culture and climate of their own setting. A multi-frame perspective is essential for effective leadership, change implementation, and response to resistance to change (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Graetz & Smith, 2010; Kezar, 2001).

Effective leadership also recognizes that individuals within the organization may view their organization differently (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Some members may see the organization as a family, while others approach their daily interaction as a political struggle. Some members may be seeking meaning while others need clarity of their responsibilities. One can only imagine the potential disconnect between organization members and leaders if the leader approaches change implementation from a political frame while individuals are looking for the psychological encouragement of the human resource frame. Similarly, if members are looking for structural clarity of job expectations while the leader is telling meaning-making, symbolic stories, then effective interaction will be a challenge. Bolman and Deal (2003) note that change agents tend to focus on reason and structure, while neglecting the human, political and symbolic elements.

Methodology

This qualitative study drew upon two different sets of teacher interview data. The first data set was gathered from nine veteran (over 20 years of teaching experience) teachers from six different districts. Administrators provided the names of these teachers based on their tendency to resist change (Snyder, 2017). The second data set focused on 10 teachers from one district. Administrators suggested these teachers based on their role as “model teachers” within the district. In a sense, the two data sets represent individuals at either end of Rogers’ (1973) diffusion spectrum: laggards and early adopters. Yet all participants clearly remained vested in their labor of love: making a lifelong impact on students.

Both data collection experiences used semi-structured, responsive interviews and gave the researcher insight into the phenomenological experience of each teacher (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Merriam, 2009). Responsive interviews provided the opportunity to build rapport with the participants and capture their own words and thoughts about their respective experiences resulting in frustration or enthusiasm (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews were digitally recorded, and then personally transcribed in order to maintain confidentiality and provide hard-copy records for coding and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Initial coding focused upon the a priori codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of organizational theory and career issues. Axial coding also identified topics and themes outside the conceptual framework.

Findings

While elements of all four organizational frames appeared during the interviews, the overwhelming majority of teachers viewed the primary role of the administrator within the context of the human resource frame. All teacher names are pseudonyms.

Human Resource Frame

Model teachers as well as resistant teachers consistently spoke toward the relational component of their administrator’s responsibilities. Teachers also highlighted the importance of administrative support for professional development and classroom resources.

Retiring secondary teacher Mr. Booker: It [the role of administrators] should be to support teachers in their efforts to educate students... I do think the whole system should be geared to what happens in the classroom, and what happens to students. And that ideal is one that often isn’t met.

Middle level literacy teacher Mrs. Bateman similarly expressed,

So, um, and then our administrators have been very supportive from day one. And then [our superintendent] of course too, of like professional development. That’s a huge advantage that our district has. Um, we can do, I wanna say, almost anything we ask. If we want to learn something, they’re going to let us go out, and if it’s reasonable, go ahead and do it.

The 30-year veteran, model science teacher Mrs. Skwerski stated,

But, we've never been told... we're never told no. You know, as long as you're willing to put in the time. They, and you wanna go somewhere that's going to be advantageous to your program or to our district, they're all about it.

Ms. Egan similarly told of her request to an administrator. "Can we go to the training? There's training this summer, can we do this? ...Can we just try it? And she's like "Absolutely.""

When implementing change, several teachers felt the primary responsibility of administrators was to provide resources about the initiative.

Ms. Johnson: And I also think if you provide the materials so that teachers know. Don't just say that this would be a good thing to do, but have some books up in the library so that people could check out, or articles.

Ms. Nelson: Um, I like to be educated about things. I like it when maybe a small group of people reads a book. And this is how we started with RTI [Response to Intervention]. We had an on-line book discussion about RTI. This year everybody, they bought a copy of the book for everybody. I think that is a better way of jumping into, into things.

Teachers also stressed the importance of building and maintaining relationships, another aspect of the human resource frame. "I think it starts with the relationship that they [administrators] have with their staff," said Mr. Stauffer. "That probably leads a lot to whether you buy into that - um, the culture that's set."

Mrs. Rittmeyer: First and foremost you [administrators] have to be a people person. It's much more than just managing uh, a system. ...Um, you need to be a good communicator. And e-mails are great, but face-to-face is better... You have to be physically present and mentally present.

Several teachers reiterated the importance of face-to-face interaction. Mrs. Rittmeyer noted, "Personally I don't like surveys. Talk to me face to face. Because you can read into something that somebody writes out and that maybe is not how it was intended." Mrs. Smith similarly expressed, "The face time needs to happen - it's the only way to build trust and respect - listening to each other."

When providing recommendations for young administrators, one veteran teacher emphasized the relational aspect of the human resource frame.

Mrs. Smith: Don't judge until you really know what's going on. And ask, don't be afraid to ask. Take the time, and the, time is precious in an administrative office - I get that. But take the time to get to know those teachers. Get to know why they do what they do. And have conversations that show you respect what they do.

Frustrations ran high when administrators forgot the importance of relationships or failed to provide teacher support. As Mrs. Smith stated,

I sent an e-mail in the last week of school and I said to my principal, I want to know what kind of support I am going to get with this child and with this parent because he has not gotten done with his work. And, I shouldn't even have to ask that question.

Structural Frame

While the majority of respondent comments emphasized the human resource frame, several recognized the importance structure and oversight – characteristics of the structural frame. Ms. Nelson stated that the administrator's primary responsibility was to focus on the big picture. "[The principal's primary role is] to be able to step back and see a view that, that we can't see from the classroom. And to make sure that things are coordinated systemically."

Ms. Johnson expressed her desire to see more of a structural frame for professional development.

But we need to have a plan in place. We don't have that... Get the plan in place. Spend a year doing that. Pick a program that's going to meet the needs of our students. Because everything I read it just talks about how important that is... Because when we do it, I want to do it right. I don't like it when we just do it halfway and then wonder why it doesn't work.

Ms. Hackler expressed her appreciation for her administrator's overarching progressive tendencies and willingness to try new initiatives.

I feel like our administrator is very forward thinking. She wants to be on the forefront of education. She's not interested in going with the status quo. Um, and that's how I am. I'm not interested in, "This is how we've done it for 20 years." Excellent, let's do it this way this year, you know?

Symbolic Frame

Several teachers reflected elements from the symbolic frame that emphasizes community, as well as the rituals, history and traditions that preserve their community. Mrs. Smith expressed appreciation for an administrator who sought her out to learn from her lengthy history in the district. "I guess he honored the fact that he wanted background information. There's been less of that. And that's OK. Everybody has a different leadership style."

Mrs. Rittmeyer highlighted the importance of building community in her elementary setting. "I guess I look at our building as a community, and we should build community. We need to be a community as a staff and with our administrator so we can feed off, and our students feel that community."

Political Frame

While none of the teachers stated that the primary role of the principal was leveraging political power, several recognized the need for mindful negotiation when implementing change. Mrs. Klinger recalled her appreciation for a previous, as well as her current administrator, both of whom were willing to have a discussion.

But it was, you were able to have a dialogue and debate. And um, hear each other, and then this is, and he had reasons – I can't remember what they were – why he liked the Mac better. But um, that was, I appreciated that. And I think we're kind of back to that right now, where I feel like we've got somebody who will listen and um, hear you and leave at the end of that and agree to disagree, or we can agree with that. Either way, I really do feel like that's in place again.

Veteran middle level literacy teacher Ms. Nelson similarly appreciated administrators willing to have a discussion so that teachers get a clearer understanding of the proposed change.

Also, frankly, if I can, if I can force my administrators through my questions to work harder to convince me that it's a, that what we're heading into is, is good for our classrooms and for our students, then it, I think it's good for the administrator to have to, "Now, now why are we telling them to do this?" To have to, to have to question themselves. I think that's good.

Mrs. Smith also noted the importance of administrators needing to give and take while listening to teachers and providing research to support proposed initiatives.

But I will ask the hard questions. I will... I'm not even bending to e-mail. I will walk and see that person if it's physically possible to do that and ask for reasons why. And give my insight into why I think that might not be the best thing to do. I don't always win those. But more often than not, something can be tailored. We can work out a deal.

Secondary social studies teacher Mr. Morales related his sense of freedom granted by his administrator when he said,

You know what I like about working here right now is the, is our administrator's like, "Go ahead." You know? Basically if I can connect it to a standard and I think it's something that's student centered and kids can get behind it, he's like "Do it man."

Mixed Frames

Other teacher comments blended the human resource and structural frames. Teachers wanted basic curricular guidelines (structural) and yet the relational, professional respect (human resource) to allow them to meet stated expectations as they deemed best. Mr. Clauson expressed appreciation for his administrator who provided both structural flexibility and personal respect.

Uh, he's, first of all he's uh, he respects what I do, how I do it and will allow me some latitude to do it. Um, he uh, he'll discuss things with, I mean if I go talk to him, and I want to talk, and if I want to talk to him about a student, or even a process like standards based, he'll talk but he won't come to me and shove it down my throat.

Mr. Schmidt similarly appreciated the basic guidelines he was given when teaching overseas, along with the professional respect to get the job done.

I just loved that when I walked in there and saw that 4-page document. This is, this is what this end of the year test is going to cover. This is how we want to do it. And it was a broad spectrum of topics. It gave me what I needed to do. But it also gave me leverage to get into areas that were not necessarily a definite part of that curriculum.

Ms. Johnson emphasized how student learning and teacher morale within the school community work interdependently. “I think it’s [the administrator’s role] to make sure that’s learning’s taking place – for the students and for the staff. I also think it’s to meet the needs of the community. And I also think it’s morale.”

Discussion

As Bolman and Deal (2003) emphasized, educational leaders must be conscious of all frames when working with constituents. Individual situations and scenarios may reflect aspects of each of the four frames. Teachers specifically expressed their desire for administrators to build a positive climate within the community and invest time in learning the history of the school (symbolic). Teachers also noted that administrators must tend to oversight of building goals, provide a clear plan for professional development and communicate basic curricular expectations (structural). Teachers also related that they wished administrators would be willing to provide opportunities for dialogue and the necessary give and take when rolling out initiatives (political).

While teachers reflected these frames in their responses, the majority of responses clearly viewed the administrator’s role from the human resource frame. Both model and resistant teachers greatly appreciated opportunities for professional development and consistent support for their own learning. Teachers desired resources about upcoming initiatives so they might read and think about those initiatives before implementing them in their classrooms. Since the primary task of teachers remains the interaction with students in the classrooms, teachers consistently expressed their desire for unwavering support from administrators to provide resources toward this endeavor. Like military officers providing support for those on the front lines, teachers receiving this support held their administrators in high regard. Whether teachers reticent toward change or teachers enthusiastic about new district initiatives, both groups expressed their appreciation for administrators who consistently supported their own learning, and the instructional strategies they deemed to be most effective for their students.

The human resource frame aligns with Day’s extensive (2013; 2011) research analyzing factors affecting teacher passion and commitment. Day (2013) found that teachers who experienced a “positive sense of agency, resilience and commitment” (p. 367) throughout their careers, cited the importance of leadership, their teaching peers, and family support. Alternatively, those teachers with declining motivation frequently referenced their workload, student behavior and poor leadership (Day, 2013). Consistent awareness of teacher resources by educational leaders sustained teacher passion and commitment.

Conclusions

The roles and responsibilities of the educational leader are broad and demanding. Requirements from the state, as well as expectations from parents, students, staff members and teachers, frequently pull administrators in competing directions. Bolman and Deal (2003) provide a helpful

conceptual framework for the numerous interactions with all constituents while emphasizing the need for educational leaders to navigate each frame.

In the midst of these many expectations, those individuals working most directly with students express the desire for ongoing support from educational leaders. Teachers from a breadth of settings and experience consistently cited their dependence on resources with which they could improve student learning. In a day when state budgets become increasingly tight, parents become increasingly critical, and the institution of education comes increasingly under attack, administrators will similarly need to be increasingly creative in ways they provide that support. As Mrs. Skwerski succinctly stated about her administrator's unwavering support for additional opportunities to enhance student learning, "...we've never been told... we're never told no."

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