

Refereed Articles

Leadership Tendencies of Continuing Education Administrators

Robert H. Palestini

Abstract

In this study a survey instrument developed by Bolman and Deal that ascertains the leadership frame(s) in which an administrator most commonly functions was utilized. The instrument also indicates whether the continuing education administrator is operating primarily or exclusively in one frame or tends to match the leadership frame to the situation encountered. Administrators' leadership tendencies were also compared according to position, type of institution, student enrollment, gender, and years of experience. A random sample of continuing education administrators and a random sample of deans of traditionally-aged, higher education programs participated in the study. *T* tests were used to explore differences within and across the variables.

Introduction

Behind every effort to improve schools and school systems lies a set of assumptions or theories about how institutions work and what may make them work better. Several major theories or schools of thought have evolved regarding the administration and leadership behavior in educational institutions (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Rational system theorists emphasize organizational goals, roles, and technology, and they look for ways to develop structures that best fit organizational purposes and environmental demands (Barnes & Krieger, 1986). Human resource theorists emphasize the interdependence between people and organizations. They focus on ways to develop a better fit between people's needs and skills, on the one hand, and their formal roles and relationships, on the other (Alderfer, 1972).

Robert Palestini is Dean, Graduate and Continuing Studies, and Professor of Education, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA.

Political theorists see power, conflict, and the distribution of scarce resources as the central issues. They argue that organizations are like jungles in which cooperation is achieved by managers who understand the uses of power, coalitions, bargaining, and conflict (Baldrige, 1971). Symbolic theorists focus on problems of meaning. They are more likely than other theorists to find virtue in organizational misbehavior and to emphasize the limited ability of managers to create organizational cohesion through power or rational design. In this view, managers must rely on images, drama, magic, and sometimes even luck or the supernatural to bring some semblance of order to organizations (Bass, 1981).

Bolman and Deal (1991) use these schools of thought in defining what they call the four frames of leadership. They posit that the leadership behavior of managers, including college administrators, falls into one or a combination of these four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

Structural leaders emphasize rationality, analysis, logic, facts, and data. They are likely to believe strongly in the importance of clear structure and well-developed management systems. A good leader is someone who thinks clearly, makes good decisions, possesses good analytic skills, and can design structures and systems that get the job done (Bolman, 1989).

Human resource leaders emphasize the importance of people. They endorse the view that the central task of management is to develop a good fit between people and organizations. They believe in the importance of coaching, participation, motivation, teamwork, and good interpersonal relations. A good leader is a facilitator and participative manager who supports and empowers others (Bolman & Deal, 1984).

Political leaders believe that managers and leaders live in a world of conflict and scarce resources. The central task of management is to mobilize the resources needed to advocate and fight for the unit's or the organization's goals and objectives. Political leaders emphasize the importance of building a power base, allies, networks, and coalitions. A good leader is an advocate and negotiator who understands politics and is comfortable with conflict (Deal & Peterson, 1990).

Symbolic leaders believe that the essential task of management is to provide vision and inspiration. They rely on personal charisma and a flair for drama to get people excited and committed to the organizational mission. A good leader is a prophet and visionary who uses symbols, tells stories, and frames experience in ways that give people hope and meaning (Deal & Celotti, 1980).

Many leaders feel most comfortable in one particular frame. The

truly effective ones have the wisdom to match frames to situations (Bolman & Deal, 1991). These leaders use them all, taking advantage of the strengths of each for suitable purposes and occasions. The four organizational frames provide a rich palette of lenses for viewing organizations. Each theoretical tradition is helpful; each also has its blind spots. The ability to shift from one conceptual lens to another provides a way to redefine situations so that they become manageable. The ability to reframe situations is one of the most powerful capacities of great artists. It can be equally powerful for educational administrators (Palestini, 1998).

Purpose of the Study

Oftentimes leadership is offered as a solution for many of the problems of organizations everywhere (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Schools will work, we are told, if principals provide strong instructional leadership. Continuing education programs in higher education need leaders who meet effectively the needs of lifelong learners (Kegan, 1995). College deans would be more effective if they were leaders rather than merely managers. Around the world middle managers say that their organizations would thrive if only senior management provided strategy, vision, and “real leadership” (DePree, 1989, p. 13).

Though the call for leadership is widespread, there is much less clarity about what the term means: “For many, perhaps for most Americans, leadership is a word that has risen above normal workaday usage as a conveyer of meaning and has become a kind of incantation. We feel that if we repeat it often enough with sufficient ardor, we will ease our sense of having lost our way, our sense of things unaccomplished, of duties unfulfilled” (Gardner, 1990, p. 37).

This mystery surrounding leadership is particularly evident in education, especially higher education, where administrators oftentimes end up in these positions by serendipity rather than intentionally. Pathways to senior administrative positions in education are well-documented (Kerr, 1984; Kerr & Gade, 1989; Moore, 1983; Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1993; Touchton, Shavlik, & Davis, 1993). These studies agree that nearly three-quarters of senior educational administrators began their careers as faculty and then moved into administration. Recent research has even indicated that more than 25% indicate that they consider themselves to be faculty rather than administrators; that is, they maintain allegiance to their instructional roots rather than perceiving themselves as true administrators (McDade, 1987). From this literature it was posited that two groups of

academic administrators exist: those who, at some point in their early years in education, chose to change the nature and direction of their careers into administration, and those who spent time in administration but maintained allegiance to classroom teaching.

In addition to moving into administration by chance, many administrators have very limited formal training in the areas of management, leadership, and educational administration (Birnbaum, 1992; Gabarro, 1987; Green, 1988; Green & McDade, 1988). Therefore, one wonders whether many educational administrators practice, or even are aware of, the current principles of effective management and leadership. This study attempts to ascertain the leadership tendencies of continuing education administrators by determining in which of Bolman and Deal's (1991) four frames these leaders feel most comfortable and, further, whether these administrators are varying their leadership behavior to the situation in which they find themselves. It also compares the leadership behavior of continuing education administrators with that of other higher education administrators, namely deans of traditionally-aged programs.

Methodology and Data Sources

In this study a survey instrument developed by Bolman and Deal (1991) that ascertains the leadership frame(s) in which an administrator most commonly functions was utilized. The instrument also indicates whether the administrator is operating primarily or exclusively in one frame or tends to match the leadership frame to the situation encountered. Administrators' leadership tendencies were also compared according to position, type of institution, student enrollment, gender, and years of experience.

A random sample of 100 college continuing education deans and directors and a random sample of 100 deans of traditionally-aged students were selected to participate. Fifty-six continuing education administrators and 58 deans of traditionally-aged students returned the survey. Thirty of the continuing education administrators were female, and 26 of the college deans were females. The *t* test was used to explore differences within and across the two groups of administrators.

Findings

Since all of the mean scores for the various frames are significantly above the minimum score of six, there is an indication that the administrators surveyed are appropriately using leadership behavior endemic to all four frames. According to Bolman and Deal (1991), effective leaders

operate in a variety of frames depending on the situation in which they find themselves.

When the administrators are considered in aggregate, they described themselves uniformly as operating *most often* in the human resource frame. This is true of both administrative categories. This is not surprising considering the amount of literature acclaiming the effectiveness of “relationship” style leadership behavior (Kahn & Katz, 1953; Misumi & Peterson, 1985).

Another finding that is uniform across all groups is that the participants described themselves as operating *least* in the political frame. Again, this is to be expected considering the negative connotation usually associated with “being political” (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

There is no significant difference between these two groups of leaders regarding such variables as the student enrollments at their institutions or the number of years that they had held their positions. However, there are significant differences noted when the categories are compared according to job position and gender.

Position Differences

The two categories of administrators differed significantly in their reported use of the symbolic frame. At the .05 level of significance, the t value of -6.12 far exceeded the 1.98 value indicating that the difference was due to chance. At the .01 level of significance, the t value of -6.12 also far exceeded the 2.61 value due to chance. In the case of the continuing education deans and directors, then, they tend to utilize the symbolic frame significantly more often than the college deans do. No significant differences in the use of the other three frames were found. The reason for this difference is an area for further research. Perhaps adding an interview process to the study would garner more information regarding why administrators prefer one frame to another.

Gender Differences

Interestingly enough, the major differences that are found in described leadership behavior are according to gender rather than position. Taken together, males in both categories are found to describe themselves as operating in the structural ($t = -4.86$) and political frames ($t = -5.62$) significantly more often than do females. In contrast, females describe themselves as operating more in the symbolic frame than do males. These data reinforce the findings of some studies that show males as being more “task” oriented and women as being more “relationship” oriented (Rosener, 1994).

Position and Gender Differences

When separated out according to position, however, the female continuing education administrators are higher than their female counterparts who are deans in traditionally-aged programs in behaving in the structural frame ($t = -4.56$) and lower in the human resource frame ($t = -3.46$). The male continuing education administrators are higher in the symbolic frame than their male counterparts in traditionally-aged programs ($t = -5.96$). Once again, the reason for these differences is an area for further research. The female continuing education administrators scored higher in the symbolic frame ($t = -3.95$) and lower in the political frame ($t = -3.64$) than do the male continuing education administrators.

Conclusions

It is encouraging to find that all of the administrators surveyed operated at least minimally in all four frames of leadership behavior. Since Bolman and Deal (1991) suggest that effective leaders operate in certain frames depending on the situation, the leaders surveyed showed the flexibility needed to be successful administrators and leaders. It is also encouraging to find that the universally preferred leadership frame was the human resource frame. It seems obvious, that among these leaders, people come first.

However, the finding that the preferred frame varied according to such variables as position and, more importantly, gender indicates that extra-situational factors are affecting the frame in which these leaders operate. From Bolman and Deal's (1991) research, one would conclude that the *situation* encountered by the administrator should be the sole determiner of the leadership frame chosen, rather than extraneous variables such as position and gender. Thus, if the structural frame, for example, were most appropriate in a given situation, one would expect that all leaders, regardless of their position or gender, would be likely to use the structural frame. Our findings suggest otherwise. Oftentimes these leaders' behavior is attributed to their position and/or their gender.

This finding would suggest that these administrators would do well to be aware that leadership tendencies can be affected by position and gender and that their reflexive or instinctive leadership behavior may not be appropriate in a given situation. Rather, they need to adjust their instinctive leadership style to the situation so that they will be most effective. So, for example, male administrators should be aware of their tendency to use the structural and political frames more often than females

do. Thus, they should make whatever adjustments necessary when the situation demands that they use the human resources and symbolic frames. Likewise, females should be aware that they have a tendency to use the human resource and symbolic frames more often than do their male counterparts. They, too, must remove themselves from their paradigm and use the structural and political frames when appropriate.

To give a very practical example, it is in the nature of continuing education to be changing constantly in an effort to accommodate the changing needs of adult learners. Suppose a continuing education dean or director was in the process of mobilizing the resources necessary to develop a new accelerated degree program in a traditional liberal arts institution. History tells us that this will be no easy task. In order to achieve this goal, it will take a great deal of leadership acumen.

When dealing with the various constituencies necessary to attain this goal, the continuing education administrator needs to adapt his or her leadership style to the differing "readiness levels" of the individuals and groups with whom he or she is dealing. Thus, the administrator needs to operate within the appropriate leadership "frame" depending on the special needs of the individual or group. He or she should not rely on only one leadership frame, the one in which the leader is most comfortable or that comes most naturally. Rather, the leader needs to vary the leadership style according to the situation. If the situation calls for an analytical approach, the structural frame should be used. If sensitivity is an issue, the human relations frame should be emphasized. If a "statement" has to be made, the symbolic frame might be most appropriate. Finally, if negotiations and trade-offs need to be involved, the political frame should be utilized.

In summary, then, administrators need to know that operating in all four leadership frames at various times depending on the situation is essential for success. In order to be optimally effective they should also know that there is a tendency for such extraneous variables as position and gender to affect leadership behavior and, further, that they may have to adjust their instinctive leadership behavior to compensate for the influence of these variables.

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