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Facilitative Leadership

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When the concept of instructional leadership first emerged in the late 1970s, principals were perceived as effective if they took charge of a school by setting clear expectations, maintaining firm discipline, and implementing high standards. This view of leadership was implicitly hierarchical, dependent on administrators firmly exercising their authority to direct subordinates.

Because schools are not easily changed by simple prescriptions, researchers began searching for more sophisticated conceptions of leadership. Influenced by developments in the private sector, they have increasingly focused their attention on "transformational" or "facilitative" models of leadership that emphasize collaboration and empowerment.

What Is Facilitative Leadership?

Initially, the term *transformational leadership* was viewed as a personal quality, an ability to inspire employees to look beyond self-interest and focus on organizational goals. The concept has evolved over time; now it is often viewed as a broad strategy that has been described as "facilitative."

David Conley and Paul Gold-man (1994) define facilitative leadership as "the behaviors that enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance." The key word here is collective; the facilitative leader's role is to foster the involvement of employees at all levels.

Several key strategies are used by facilitative leaders: overcoming resource constraints; building teams; providing feedback, coordination, and conflict management; creating communication networks; practicing collaborative politics; and modeling the school's vision (Conley and Goldman).

How Do Facilitative Leaders Use Power?

Traditionally, power has been viewed as domination through formal authority, flowing from the top down and vesting decisions in a small number of people. Facilitative power, in contrast, is based on mutuality and synergy, and it flows in multiple directions. The hierarchy remains intact, but leaders use their authority to support professional give-and-take (Diane Dunlap and Paul Goldman 1990).

Schools may be especially appropriate arenas for this type of power because teaching requires autonomy and discretion, not standardized formulas. Teachers can't succeed just by imposing mandates on

students; rather, they have to work indirectly, creating conditions under which students will learn. Principals control learning even less directly; they have to create environments in which teachers can work effectively. In short, facilitative power is power through, not power over (Dunlap and Goldman).

Despite the emphasis on mutuality, facilitative power does not rely on voting or other formal mechanisms. Dunlap and Goldman emphasize that facilitation occurs within the existing structure, meaning that whoever normally has legal authority to ratify decisions continues to do so. Unlike delegation, where administrators unilaterally assign tasks to subordinates, in a facilitative environment, anyone can initiate a task and recruit anyone else to participate. The process thrives on informal negotiation and communication.

What Does Facilitative Leadership Require of Administrators?

Facilitative environments are rich, complex, and unpredictable, demanding leadership skills that go beyond the merely technical. The act of leading through others is not easily reduced to simple formulas.

Clearly, facilitative leaders behave differently than traditional leaders. They spend much of their time negotiating decisions they could unilaterally make; they encourage competitive views from subordinates; they make decisions on the fly, in corridors and classrooms.

But successful facilitation may depend less on any particular set of behaviors than on the underlying belief system. Conley and Goldman emphasize the importance of trust, "a letting go of control and an increasing belief that others can and will function independently and successfully within a common framework of expectations and accountability."

Achieving this trust is not a trivial task; Conley and Goldman warn that administrators may lapse into "pseudo-facilitative leadership," using the language of facilitation while covertly trying to lead employees to a preordained conclusion. Similarly, Andrew Hargreaves (1991) warns of "contrived collegiality," in which administrators attempt to mandate collaboration using hierarchical methods.

Facilitative leadership may also require richer perceptions of organizational life. Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (1991) identify four "frames" for thinking about leadership. The rational frame focuses on the formal demands of the system, such as goals, policies, and constraints. The human resource frame considers the human need of participants. The symbolic frame addresses the values, rites, and rituals that provide members with a sense of community. The political frame considers the way that participants pursue their own interests.

Bolman and Deal note that few leaders use more than two of these frames; yet in a facilitative environment, all are important. For example, a principal who is facilitating greater faculty involvement in teacher evaluation is more likely to succeed if he or she can recognize the anxiety that evaluation causes (human resource frame); anticipate teacher concerns about judging peers (political frame); create support by casting the issue in terms of shared expertise (symbolic frame); and judge whether the new

procedures are fulfilling their intended purpose (rational frame).

What Tensions Are Associated With Facilitative Leadership?

The radically different assumptions of facilitative leadership are likely to create ambiguity and discomfort. Conley and Goldman characterize facilitation as "the management of tensions."

Without question, the most serious issue is the blurring of accountability. Facilitative leadership creates a landscape of constantly shifting responsibilities and relationships, yet the formal system continues to turn to one person for results. Principals may wonder about the wisdom of entrusting so much to those who will not share the accountability; teachers may be nervous about being enveloped in schoolwide controversies from which they are normally buffered (Conley and Goldman; Mark Smylie and Jean Brownlee-Conyers 1992).

Administrators also face a juggling act in accommodating the unpredictable pace of facilitation with the inflexible demands of the hierarchical system. While trying to create schoolwide involvement, the principal is continually being pressured to act on a host of issues. For example, a proposal to replace basal readers with a whole-language approach is likely to generate a wide-ranging debate that deserves a full airing, yet looming over the process is an arbitrary requisition deadline. In some instances, the principal must allow the issues to play themselves out; in other cases, he or she needs to say, "It's time to move on."

The new approach may create great excitement and high expectations, unleashing multiple initiatives that stretch resources, drain energy, and fragment the collective vision. Somehow the principal must keep a hand on the reins without discouraging the innovators. At the same time, the risky business of change will intensify teachers' traditional demands for emotional support and protection from bureaucratic demands. The facilitative leader must know when to provide this support and when to challenge the comfortable status quo (Conley and Goldman).

How Can Administrators Become Facilitative Leaders?

Conley and Goldman urge would-be facilitative leaders to move slowly, assessing their own leadership styles and the school's culture before diving in. Not every school is ready to embrace collaborative leadership, and every organization goes through periods when highly directive leadership is more appropriate.

Principals should clearly communicate their intentions and carefully choose the target for their initial efforts; ideally, the issue should be one that is important to teachers, yet safe enough that the principal can live with any outcome. Emerging facilitative leaders should also seek out like-minded colleagues to form a support network.

Shirley Hord (1992) counsels patience, noting that "change is a process, not an event." She points out

that individuals must change before the institution can, and that they do so in different ways and at different rates. Facilitators must adapt their strategies to these individual variations.

Above all, Conley and Goldman caution administrators against becoming preoccupied with formal roles, structures, and procedures. Workplace democracy is not an end in itself but merely a way of enhancing teacher performance and student learning.

Resources

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