

INNOVATION AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

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Background of the Problem

Educators have been struggling for over twenty years to find the combination of approaches that will be most effective in leading schools, through periods of turbulence and change. Marzano (2003) discovered that in effective schools standardized test pass rates measure at 72.4% versus only 27.6% in schools found to be ineffective. Given such high stakes as these, and given its high impact, trustworthy leadership is a critical element of success in any organization (Avolio and Luthens, 2006) the importance of effective educational leadership has never been greater than at present. School failure is incredibly costly in economic, social, and human terms. Gladwell (2006) found that psychologists and other experts trained in specific aspects of human behavior were able to do what he refers to as 'thin slicing' a social, teaching or leadership situation. Thin slicing refers to being able to look at a short segment (a few minutes or less) of, say, a teaching situation, and determine with over 90% accuracy whether the instructor was a success or failure in his or her regular classroom setting. Finding the factors, which lie behind snap-insights like these and using this knowledge to enhance training has tremendous possibilities for the field of education. These insights are needed given the tremendous impact of leadership and its impact on school effectiveness.

Conducting informal interviews with several teachers of varied backgrounds at a local international school provided insights into some common themes they were looking for in educational leadership. There seems to be a thread of ideas that recur in many of these discussions. The administrator of a school needs to, "have been a teacher, know what it is like in a classroom, and make decisions from that perspective." They need to have, "a background and experience in teaching." "Know what empirical research says about instruction and school effectiveness." They also need to be "clear on what they want from you (the teacher)." A teacher also mentioned, "they need to know how to teach and how to help the teacher improve teaching." Knowing how to "help the teacher improve" was important. "Understanding educational pedagogy" was noted. Comments such as these, point towards teachers viewing instructional leadership, teacher mentoring and classroom presence as being of significance.

Teachers were also concerned that the administrator "be empathic" and "be able to understand where students are coming from." Other concerns included knowing that "some people are open to discussion, others just want direction." Teachers want administrators to "be able to understand where others are coming from. Be able to balance process and people without going too far in either direction." The "ability to work out this difficult balance" was seen as important. "Be able to understand people," "Be clear with no ambiguity," "Be brief and understand that there are only so many hours in a day" in order to complete tasks, were further factors of significance. Effective "interactions with parents, teachers, and students" was another factor stressed. "Be an active listener and be open-minded." "Political ability," "Understand both the teacher and the management side, understand psychology," "Be able to get people to discuss openly and be comfortable with you," were all also given prominence. Teachers seemed to be looking for a balancing of the mental and emotional sides of a given situational equation, an empathic approach from their administrator that acts as a backdrop in any given task combined with a student-centered focal point for understanding the changes needed in the school.

Teachers were also concerned that an administrator has "moderation skill. Being able to walk in and see a situation where there are two sides that do not see eye to eye. But the leader is able to find a successful conclusion. Can't always blindly support teachers, but don't always go against them in interactions with parents." If "There are two different sets of teachers one which supports a program and one heavily against it" as was the case with an example given by one teacher, then the administrator needs to find an effective way to mediate. Know how to "assess different personal styles with varied groups of people," "Open-minded and can look at both sides without being judgmental until the time is right (for a decision)," "Be supportive of the teacher in parental matters," "talking with teachers, sit together, not just e-mail," "make respect a priority," "understand different personalities and be approachable and friendly,"

“cohesiveness with faculty and students,” “maintaining harmony,” all received emphasis. Teachers seemed to be expecting a fairly high level of ability to proactively resolve conflicting issues, to deal with differing needs amongst stakeholders, both with staff and students, in addition to parents.

The common threads that emerged in these interviews lead in the direction of finding a series of dilemmas or challenges in today’s varied and diverse educational climate that administrators need to be able to respond to effectively in leading schools through these often troubled times. Looking at what teachers are saying about what they need, as well as what scholars in the field of education and leadership are saying about dealing with the obstacles and challenges the leader faces, will give us information we can use in enhancing leadership capacity in a manner that furthers student progress and growth.

Work previously done in the American context on identifying and utilizing common threads that relate to effective leadership and to enhancing student learning includes the work referenced on the web site Mid Continent Research for Education and Learning (2008). MCREL uses a multiple perspective feedback profile using 21 leadership responsibilities, which are identified and rated in a 92-item survey. Principals are able to use these ratings combined with professional development tools available on the site to enhance leadership practices.

Statement of the Problem

Today’s educational environment is in a constant state of flux. As has often been stated, change is the only constant. Given the varied directives and imperatives coming from all levels in the educational system, and the demands from every quarter from parents to school boards, students and community members, the administrator can feel that he is cast adrift, lost in a sea of ever changing circumstances and needs that adjust and mutate moment by moment. What is needed in this environment is a set of consistent perspectives to guide the administrator. A measurement of the response to these challenges is needed, which can be calibrated in a manner so as to guide future innovation, change, and improvement. In short, what is needed is to determine what the challenges are for the educational leader, what the response effectiveness is, and how training can be developed and improved so as to enhance performance.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to discover the challenges faced by the educational leader (school administrator), to measure the performance against these challenges, and then to suggest and begin to develop a training regime geared to enhancing and improving the response to these challenges.

Research Design

What was envisioned in this research was an input-output process that started with identifying the current challenges through an overview of general and specific research in the area and through an interviewing process. For the interviewing process portion, the school in which the researcher works, Ruamrudee International School (RIS), was utilized. The researcher’s role is that of teaching and setting up programs for students with special needs in the middle school at RIS. RIS is a respected international school with procedures generally considered to be in line with best practices in education. Established in 1957 by the Redemptorist Fathers of Thailand, RIS is a k-12 institution with Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation serving approximately two thousand students of varying nationalities. The teachers interviewed come from a variety of national backgrounds. Their teaching and professional credentials are from institutions generally considered to be exemplary in the field of education. As such, given their sound credentials combined with experience in the Thai context, they are viewed as a solid prototype for identifying challenges faced by today’s educators. In the manner of identifying challenges, the themes drawn from these educators, combined with specific and more general research, helped in clarifying what a prototypical school should be like in terms of facing and dealing with challenges in education. This prototype enabled a better examination of Thai schools to be effected in this study. Once the above challenge identification process was completed, an assessment tool was developed to facilitate the measurement of identified challenges. It was at this point that one moved from the input or research side of the process and crossed a demarcation line into the output or development side of the process where one was actually producing results with educational leaders in schools in an interactive manner. This movement involved ascertaining actual realities on the ground in sample schools and determining appropriate strategies based on best practices for leadership. The difference between these gave data for a ‘gap analysis’ where needs were identified and remedial procedures attempted to address the needs. The needs remediation involved model building where one moved towards bridging the gap shown in the gap