

Reframing the Role of School Leaders

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss how the role of the school leader has changed over time from a hierarchical, bureaucratic image to one of devolved decision making and school self-determination. This altered view of the school leader explains the centrality of the empowerment of teachers, parents, and students; the importance of site-based decision making; and the development of professional learning communities.

Despite some influential work of the effective schools research (National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development, 2000) and substitutes for leadership (Yukl, 2010), school leadership has historically been defined as position or role based and hierarchical in nature (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). This means that those higher in the organizational structure are seen as more powerful than those below them and that the right to lead is limited to those provided with legitimate authority, i.e. superintendent, principal, etc. Most scholars believe that this approach to leadership is ineffective (English, 2008; Northouse, 2010).

A New Approach to School Leadership

The type of leader needed in tomorrow's schools calls for a new approach to managing schools. The school leader, faculty, staff, parents, and community work together sharing a vision of how to help all students learn. Each school is considered a professional learning community. Management is less hierarchical (Lunenburg & Carr, 2003; Rubin, 2009). Important decisions are made as much by site-level stakeholders as by state- or district-level participants. This emerging view of the school leader accounts for the centrality of organic and adaptive models of organization (Kruse & Louis, 2009) and the importance of site-based management. That is, decisions about school programs are decentralized to the school level, and leadership is no longer limited to formal organizational positions (Patronis, 2010). Leadership and management are based on ability rather than role (Smylie, 2010). Leadership activities are dispersed according to

competence for required tasks rather than authority. This altered view of the school leader explains the centrality of the empowerment of teachers, parents, and students; the importance of site-based decision making; and the development of professional learning communities.

Reframing the role of the school leader for the future is best captured by the rubric of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2006). Central to this emerging view of school leadership is a movement from a “power over” approach to a “power to” approach (English, 2008; Northouse, 2010). School leaders are expected to be change agents and facilitators, who improve conditions for learning through the creation of cultures that allow schools to operate as professional learning communities. That is, school leaders are considered leaders of leaders. They are expected to bring out the leadership potential of every teacher and employee in the building and to work collaboratively with them, so that the school as a whole ends up making better decisions and is committed to continuous improvement (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2009). Today’s effective school leaders share leadership. They empower teachers to lead school projects and initiatives rather than serving as the chief problem solvers. They lead from the center rather than from the top, and they create an environment where teachers can continually learn and grow (Kruse & Louis, 2009; Senge, 2001, 2006).

Leading from the center, teacher empowerment, site-based decision making, and professional learning communities then are at the very core of a redefinition of the role of today’s school leader. In the more successful schools, today’s leader clearly defined themselves as at the center of the school’s staff rather than at the top (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Wilcox & Angelis, 2010). Instead of occupying an authoritative position, they preferred instead to give leadership to others and to guide by example and by indirectly inducing thoughtfulness, rather than by making direct suggestions. In each instant, their role as an authority figure was downplayed and their role as a source of support and assistance was emphasized. These emergent school leaders believe in delegation; in developing collaborative decision-making processes; and in stepping back from being the chief problem solver in a school, by linking these roles more explicitly to the development of a professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2010; Kruse & Louis, 2009; Senge, 2001, 2006).

Conclusion

The role of the school leader has changed over time from a hierarchical, bureaucratic image to one of devolved decision making and school self-determination. School leaders, faculty, support staff, parents, and community work together sharing a vision of how to help all students achieve.

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