The Management Function of Principals

Fred C. Lunenburg
Sam Houston State University

_____

ABSTRACT

Some scholars believe that management is a prerequisite to leadership. You can't change something unless it is a viable system in the first place. Management of the day-to-day operation of a school is essential. In this article, I discuss the key elements of organizational structure. The six elements are: job specialization, departmentalization, delegation, decentralization, span of control, and line and staff positions.

_____

Most of the recent literature on the principalship has focused on the role of the principal as instructional leader (Glickman, 2010). But management is important in addition to instructional leadership (Jones, 2010; Kruse & Louis, 2009). We know that when school improvements occur, principals play a central role in (a) ensuring that resources – money, time, and professional development – align with instructional goals, (b) supporting the professional growth of teachers in a variety of interconnected ways, (c) including teachers in the information loop, (d) cultivating the relationship between the school and community, and (e) managing the day-to-day tasks of running a school. Each of these is viewed as a management task in the sense that it involves daily or weekly attention to problem solving within the school and between the school and its immediate environment.

Some scholars believe that management is a prerequisite to leadership (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). You can't change something unless it is a viable system in the first place. It has to continue to survive while you take it to the next level. Management of the day-to-day operation of a school is essential. The leadership, though, is how we are going to make the system work better? Leaders ask questions, such as: What is the business we are in? What is it we are trying to do? How are we going to put all of our resources together – to continue to grow, to continue to respond to new needs, to enable schools to be places where engaged teaching and learning occur? Very often good leaders, although they know the management skills, don't take the time personally to practice the management skills. And part of leadership is knowing what you do best and using all of your available resources. Thus, principals work with students, teachers, parents, and other school stakeholders to set up organizational structures and help to develop other people in the school by delegating and very carefully monitoring the management functions in the school.

Think of all the activities employees perform in a school: scheduling classes, ordering supplies, maintaining student records, teaching classes, cleaning classrooms, preparing food, driving buses, typing letters, photocopying, and the like. If you were to make a list, you would probably identify several hundred different tasks. Without some structures, policies, and processes, would all the required tasks be performed efficiently and effectively? Who will teach the classes, clean the classrooms, wash the chalkboards, serve lunch in the cafeteria, drive the buses, or mail student report cards?

The management function of *organizational structure* is the process of deploying human and physical resources to carry out tasks and achieve school goals (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011). How do principals manage the day-to-day activities of the school and, at the same time, work toward the school's improvement. They don't do it alone.

Key Elements of Organizational Structure

In this section, I will describe six basic elements of organizational structure: job specialization, departmentalization, delegation, decentralization, span of management, and line and staff authority (Robbins & Judge, 2011).

Job Specialization

The most basic concept of organizational structure is *job specialization* — the degree to which the overall task of the school is broken down and divided into smaller, component parts. For example, a school may employ principals, school psychologists, social workers, counselors, teachers, and many other support staff including secretaries, food service personnel, maintenance workers, bus drivers, and the like. This specialization of tasks provides an identity for the job and those performing it, which collectively adds back to the total. That is, the contributions of each of the individual jobs equals the original overall job of the school - to educate all children — including management coordination.

Specialization is a key organizing concept for several reasons. First, repetition improves skill. By performing the same task repeatedly, the employee gains expertise and thus increases productivity. Second, wage economics may also arise through the development of various employee levels. Complex jobs can be staffed with skilled personnel and simple tasks with unskilled labor. Third, whenever a sufficient volume of routine work is isolated, mechanization becomes a possibility; the use of computers for office work is an example. Finally, job specialization allows a variety of tasks to be performed simultaneously. For example, in a school, budgeting, counseling, typing, preparing lunch, and teaching can be performed concurrently by different people.

Despite the advantages, however, schools can overdo job specialization. When carried to extremes, job specialization can lead to fatigue, monotony, boredom, and job dissatisfaction, which can result in absenteeism, turnover, and a decrease in the quality of work performed. To counter these problems, school principals have begun to search for alternatives that will maintain the positive benefits of job specialization.

The three most common alternatives to job specialization are job rotation, job

enlargement, and job enrichment (Herzberg, 2009). *Job rotation* involves systematically moving employees from one job to another. In large school districts, principals are often rotated among schools every five years. *Job enlargement* adds breadth to a job by increasing the number and variety of activities performed by an employee. *Job enrichment* adds depth to a job by adding "administrative" activities (decision making, staffing, budgeting, reporting) to a teacher's responsibilities. The latter two alternatives are recommended as a way to restructure schools through shared governance, participatory management, and site-based management, whereby teachers play a more active role in the operation of the school.

Departmentalization

Once the overall task of a school is divided into specialized jobs, these jobs must be grouped into some logical organizational units such as teams, departments, or divisions, a concept known as *departmentalization***.** The most common grouping in schools is by function. Departmentalization by function groups together in a common organizational unit people performing similar or closely related activities. For example, common departments in a school are English, social studies, mathematics, and science. Common divisions in school districts are personnel, instruction, business, and research and development. Similar activities are coordinated from a common place in the organizational hierarchy. The instructional division, for example, controls only instructional activities. Each functional unit may be broken down further for coordination and control purposes.

Functional departmentalization is one of the most widely adopted approaches for grouping school district activities because of its versatility (Robbins & Judge, 2011). It can be used in both large and small school districts. It can be used at many different levels in the organizational hierarchy, from central office levels or further down to individual building levels, such as instructional grade-level teams in an elementary school or subject-matter departments within a high school.

Functional departmentalization offers a number of other advantages. Because people who perform similar functions work together, each department can be staffed by experts in that functional area. Decision making and coordination are easier, because division administrators or department heads need to be familiar with only a relatively narrow set of skills. Functional departments at the central office can use a school district's resources more efficiently because a department's activity does not have to be repeated across several school district divisions. Functional departmentalization has certain disadvantages as well. Personnel can develop overly narrow and technical viewpoints that lose sight of the total system perspective; communication and coordination across departments can be difficult; and conflicts often emerge as each department or unit attempts to protect its own turf.

Delegation

Another key concept of organizational structure is *delegation,* the process

principals use to transfer authority from one position to another within a school or school

district. For example, superintendents delegate authority to associate or assistant superintendents, assistant superintendents delegate authority to principals, principals delegate authority to assistant principals, and so on. Delegating authority does not reduce the authority of the superintendents, assistant superintendents, or principals. To delegate means to grant or to confer. To delegate does not mean to surrender authority. A principal who delegates authority in no way abdicates the legitimate right to act on behalf of the school.

There are three steps in the delegation process. First, the principal assigns *responsibility.* For example, when a principal asks an assistant principal to prepare an enrollment projection, order supplies and materials, or hire a new teacher, he is assigning responsibility. Second, along with the assignment, the assistant principal is given the *authority* to do the job. The principal may give the assistant principal the power to access enrollment data, to negotiate on the price of supplies and materials, and to submit a hiring notice to the Personnel Department. Finally, the principal requires *accountability* from the assistant principal. That is, the assistant principal incurs an obligation to carry out the task assigned by the principal.

There are many reasons for delegating. For one, delegating tasks enables principals to accomplish more than if they attempted to handle every task personally. For example, in a large urban high school, a principal may have five or six associate or assistant principals, five or six counselors, a social worker, a school psychologist, and 300 teachers. Any one of these individuals is a potential delegate. Moreover, delegation allows principals to focus their energies on the most crucial, high-priority tasks, for example student achievement. Here you can see the connection between management and instructional leadership. Delegation also enables faculty to grow and develop. By participating in decision making and problem solving, faculty learn more about the overall operation of the school, which is the essence of site-based management.

Despite the positive reasons for delegating, problems often arise in the delegation process. For several reasons, principals may be reluctant to delegate. For one thing, some principals may be so disorganized that they are incapable of planning the activities to be assigned to others. For another, they may not want to delegate because they lack confidence in the abilities of faculty to do a task well, and they fear being held personally accountable for the work of others. Conversely, some principals may fear that others will perform the delegated tasks so efficiently that their own positions will be threatened. And, some principals want so strongly to dominate and influence others that they refuse to delegate authority.

Not all barriers to effective delegation are found in superiors, however. Many faculty members try to avoid having authority delegated to them. First, delegation adds to a faculty member's responsibilities and accountabilities. Second, many faculty members fear criticism for mistakes. Third, some faculty members lack the necessary self-confidence to take on added responsibilities. Finally, they may perceive that the rewards for assuming additional responsibilities are inadequate.

Delegation is critical to effective management. A principal can increase his effectiveness as a delegator by adhering to the following principles (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006).

1. *Principal should not criticize colleagues.* Criticism makes colleagues reluctant to assume additional responsibilities in the future. When a mistake is made, the deficiency should be explained in such a way that improved performance results in the future, rather than defensiveness and a desire to avoid responsibility.

2. *Principals should insure that colleagues have the necessary information and resources to do the job.* When there is a lack of necessary information and resources to do a good job, colleagues may hesitate to accept new assignments.

3. *Principals should provide incentives for assuming additional responsibilities.* Rewards for assuming additional assignments must be adequate.

4. *Principals should guard against letting the colleagues' task become their own.* Frequently, a teacher will come to a principal and say, "I have a problem", and after some conversation about the issue the principal agrees to handle the matter. Being helpful in solving problems is important, but principals should get things done with and through other people.

5. *Principals should delegate to the point where the decision has a local focus.* In a school departmentalized by function, the principal could delegate school instructional decisions to department heads and guidance and counseling-related decisions to counselors. For each of these colleagues, the decisions they make affect only their own school departments or divisions. Decisions having "non-local" *district-w*ide impact such as those concerning system-wide collective bargaining agreements, could not be delegated locally, but would have to be made in the superintendent's office.

Decentralization

Another key concept of organizational structure is the degree of decentralization of authority within the school district. Actually authority can be centralized or decentralized.

The concept of decentralization, like the concept of delegation, has to do with the degree to which authority is dispersed or concentrated (Zajda, 2010). Whereas the term *delegation* usually refers to the extent to which individual leaders delegate authority and responsibility to people reporting directly to them, *decentralization* is systematically dispersing the power and decision making throughout the school district to middle- and lower-level leaders. Conversely, centralization is systematically concentrating the power and authority near the top, or in the head of a school (the principal) or school district (the superintendent). No organization is completely centralized or decentralized. Rather, these are extremes of a continuum, and school districts fall somewhere in between. The difference is one of relative degree; that is, a school district can be described as decentralized relative to other schools or school districts.

Several characteristics determine how decentralized a school is relative to others (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008).

1. *Number of decisions made at lower levels.* The greater the number of decisions made by those lower in the organizational hierarchy (staff members), the more decentralized the school.

2. *Importance of decisions made at lower levels.* In a decentralized school, teachers can make decisions involving substantial resources, increased people power, or commit the school to a new course of action.

3. *The scope of decisions made at lower levels.* If teachers can make decisions that affect more than one function, the school is probably decentralized.

4. *Amount of checking on school principals.* In a highly decentralized school district, top-level administrators (superintendents) seldom review day-to-day decisions of building principals. The presumption is that these decisions were made correctly. Evaluation is based on overall results of the school.

The advantages of decentralization are similar to the advantages of delegation: unburdening of top-level administrators; improved decision making because decisions are made closer to the firing line; better training, morale, and initiative at lower levels; and more flexibility to adjust to changing conditions. These advantages are so compelling that it is tempting to think of decentralization as "good" and centralization as "bad."

But total decentralization, with no coordination from the top, would be undesirable. The very purpose of organization — efficient integration of subunits for the good of the whole — would be diminished without some centralized control. Even in very decentralized school districts, top administrators such as superintendents retain a number of decisions: setting overall goals, strategic planning, school district policy formulation, bargaining with unions, and development of financial and accounting systems. The question for school leaders is not whether a school or school district should be decentralized but to what extent it should be decentralized.

Decentralization has value only to the extent that it assists a school district or school to achieve its goals effectively. In determining the amount of decentralization appropriate for a school district, the following internal characteristics are usually considered (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008):

1. *The cost and risk associated with the decision.* Principals may be wary of delegating authority for decisions that could have an impact on the performance of their own subunits or the school as a whole. This caution is out of consideration not only for the school's welfare but also for their own, because the responsibility for results remains with the delegator.

2. *A principal's preference for a high degree of involvement and confidence in colleagues.* Some principals pride themselves on their detailed knowledge of everything that happens within their purview of responsibility. This has been referred to as running a tight ship. Conversely, other principals take pride in confidently delegating everything possible to their colleagues in order to avoid getting bogged down in petty details and to preserve their own expertise with the school's major goal of teaching and learning.

3. *The organizational culture.* The shared norms, values, and beliefs (culture) of members of some schools support tight control at the top. The culture of other schools supports the opposite approach. The history of the school's culture then will have some bearing on the amount of decentralization appropriate.

4. *The abilities of staff.* This characteristic is, in part, a circular process. If authority is not delegated because of lack of confidence in the talents below, the talent

will not have an opportunity to develop. Furthermore, the lack of internal training and development will make it more difficult to find and hold talented and ambitious people. This, in turn, will make it more difficult to decentralize.

Span of Control

Another key concept of organizational structure is the *span of control* — the number of subordinates who report directly to a given principal. There is a limit to the number of persons one principal can effectively supervise. Care should be taken to keep the span of control, also called the *span of management,* within manageable limits.

Although there is agreement that there is a limit to the number of subordinates a principal can effectively supervise or manage, no agreement exists on the precise number. In fact, it is generally acknowledged that the optimum span of control varies greatly, even within the same school. Although principals may directly supervise only three to eight persons, assistant principals and department heads directing subordinates who are performing relatively similar activities may be able to manage much larger numbers efficiently.

The critical factors in determining the appropriate span of control include the following (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008).

1. *Similarity of functions.* Span of control should increase as the number of different functions to be supervised increases.

2. *Geographic proximity.* Span of control should decrease the more geographically dispersed the functions to be supervised.

3. *Complexity of functions.* Span of control should be smaller for subordinates performing more complex tasks than for those performing simpler tasks.

4. *Degree of interdependence among units.* The greater the need for coordination of interdependent work units, the smaller the span of control.

5. *Level of motivation of subordinate personnel.* Increased motivation permits a larger span of control; and a larger span of control increases motivation.

6. *Competence of principals.* The ability of principals to delegate authority and responsibility varies. Span of control for those who can delegate more can be much larger than those who can delegate little authority.

Line and Staff Positions

An important point in examining the key concepts of organizational structure is to distinguish between line and staff positions. *Line positions* are traditionally defined as those that form a part of the main line of authority (or chain of command) that flows throughout the school or school district. *Staff positions* are positions outside the main line of authority or direct chain of command that are primarily advisory or supportive in nature (Robbins & Judge, 2011).

Line positions are represented by a solid line in most organizational charts, starting with the superintendent and extending down through the various levels in the hierarchy to the point where the basic activities of the school district — teaching — are

carried out. The roles of superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, principals, and teachers are line positions. Each has goals that derive from and contribute to those of the overall school district.

The positions of assistant to the superintendent and legal counsel are staff positions. These personnel perform specialized functions that are primarily intended to help line administrators. For example, the legal counsel is not expected to contribute to school district outcomes. Instead, he answers questions from and provides advice to the superintendent concerning legal matters that confront the school district. The assistant to the superintendent might be involved in such activities as computer programming, preparing enrollment projections, or conducting special studies that flow to the superintendent in terms of information or advice. Staff positions are represented by dashed lines in organizational charts, which imply that school district staff personnel communicate and advise line administrators.

The line and staff organization allows much more specialization and flexibility than the line organization alone. However, staff authority sometimes undermines the integrity of line departments and personnel that are accountable for results. Several factors may cause conflicts between and among line and staff departments and personnel (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011)). Because of the nature of this topic, we need to shift our focus to the school district.

1. Staff personnel may exceed their authority and attempt to give orders directly to line personnel.
2. Line personnel may feel that staff specialists do not fully understand line problems and think their advice is not workable.
3. Staff may attempt to take credit for ideas implemented by line; conversely, line may not acknowledge the role staff has played in helping to resolve problems.
4. Because staff is highly specialized, it may use technical terms and language that line cannot understand.
5. Top administration may not have clearly communicated the extent of authority staff has in its relationship with line.
6. Organizationally, staff departments and personnel are placed in relatively high positions close to top administration; lower-level line departments and personnel tend to resent this.

Basically, the line-staff conflict evident in many school districts is impossible to eliminate completely. However, it is possible to create conditions wherein line-staff conflicts are manageable. School districts can reduce the degree of line-staff conflict through the following strategies (Pettinger, 2011).

1. Create a public recognition of the reality of interdependence between the line and staff units, and develop a culture that attacks problems in a collaborative manner.
2. Do not allow organizational politics to mask true line-staff contributions. Cross-unit sabotage, back-stabbing, spying, and intentional distortion can eliminate any hope of cooperation and lead to internal disintegration.

3. Develop an understanding of the broader organizational vision and goal and an associated recognition of each unit's responsibility to that goal.

4. Foster a climate in which leaders feel free to communicate their concerns, voice their perceptions, and discuss any apprehensions they have concerning actions of the other units.

5. Establish a team-based approach to problem solving that stresses the effective resolution of issues without undue concern over who will get "credit" for the solution.

6. Encourage nontask-related interaction between line and staff administrators to facilitate understanding of the different perspectives, values, needs, and goals held by both groups.

The reduction of line-staff conflict is vital to overall school district performance. The creation of an organizational structure can unintentionally induce or minimize disruptive line-staff relationships.

Conclusion

The internal structure of schools differs along a number of dimensions. Among the most important of these are job specialization, departmentalization, delegation, decentralization, span of control, and line and staff positions. Job specialization, which involves grouping various jobs into units, can contribute significantly to school effectiveness. Departmentalization involves the grouping of jobs according to some logical arrangement. Most schools employ functional departmentalization. Delegation is the process of establishing a pattern of authority between a leader and a staff member and consists of three basic components: assigning responsibility, granting authority, and creating accountability. At the overall organizational level, the establishment of patterns of authority is called decentralization. Factors influencing the degree of decentralization include risk associated with the decision, a leader's preference for involvement, confidence in staff, and organizational culture. Span of control refers to the number of staff members who report directly to a leader. Critical factors in determining the appropriate span of control include similarity of functions, geographic proximity, complexity of function, degree of interdependence, level of motivation of staff, and competence of leaders. Line and staff positions as opposed to line positions exclusively can enhance organizational effectiveness. Line positions are those that form a part of the main line of authority that flows throughout the school district. Staff positions are positions outside the main line of authority that are primarily advisory or supportive in nature.

References

Glickman, C. D. (2010). *SuperVision and instructional leadership: A developmental approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Herzberg, F. (2009). *One more time: How do you motivate employees?* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Ivancevich, J. M., Konopaske, R., & Matteson, M. T. (2011). *Organizational behavior and management*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Jones, G. R. (2011). *Essentials of contemporary management*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Kruse, S. D., & Louis, K. S. (2009). Building *strong school cultures: A Guide to leading change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2006). The *principalship: Vision to action*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Ornstein, A. O. (2008). *Educational administration: Concepts and practices*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.

Pettinger, R. (2011). *Organizational behavior: Performance management in practice*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis.

Robbins, S. P., & Judge, T. A. (2011). *Organizational behavior* (14th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Zajda, J. (2009). *Decentralization, School-based management, and quality*. New York, NY: Springer.