Decision-making assessment: improving principal performance

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Introduction

The identification of quality candidates for principal positions has been an ongoing concern of legislators, educators, and private sector leaders. For some, the principal is considered to be the single most important factor related to a school’s success or failure (Andrews and Soder, 1987; Southern Regional Educational Board, 1986). Others offer caution not to over generalize the impact of the principal in relation to such indicators as student achievement in defining school success (Hallinger et al., 1996). Most, however, agree that principals need to be effective leaders.

Leadership at any level and setting has a direct bearing on the organization and its people (Bennis, 1993). When organizations such as schools have effective leaders, programs and people thrive (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1990). Conversely, poor leadership gives birth to a legacy that creates ill-will among members, and causes harmful results for the organization. This link between organizational effectiveness and leadership has led to consideration of the essential qualities of effective leaders. Ironically, there is no single list of leadership characteristics widely recognized by scholars.

The qualities of effective leaders have changed as different theories of leadership emerged (Fiedler and Garcia, 1987; Lewin et al., 1939; McGregor, 1944; Sergiovanni, 1984). As a result, the demands of leadership refer more to context, culture, and inherent values of the people leading the organizations. Because of its wide array of possible characteristics, leadership is difficult to define. Burns (1978) suggests that “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (p. 2). In essence, leadership means something different to each person. Consequently, organizations define leadership within their unique context. This sense of ambiguity has generated a variety of models, each with its definition of good leadership, that seeks to identify, select, or train individuals with leadership potential who can integrate these qualities into performance.

Preparation of school principals

Universities in collaboration with school districts and national associations have chosen to prepare students for school leadership roles by linking research to training (Weiss, 1973). This collaborative effort has led to the development of leadership academies, leadership workshops, and assessment centers to identify and select effective principals. Many of these leadership identification and selection paradigms are driven by the characteristics model (Kirby, 1992). The characteristics model identifies a number of variables associated with research on leadership. The use of these characteristics brings structure to the leadership paradigm and moves it towards a quantitative perspective. Organizations concerned with the preparation of principals have worked to identify measurable characteristics. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) identified 12 characteristics of school leadership and more recently, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration identified 21 domains of leadership characteristics (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1989; Reynolds, 1994).

Private funding agencies, for-profit organizations, universities, and public educational districts have openly collaborated to identify, select, and train individuals most suitable for school leadership (Milstein, 1992). There is some evidence that their efforts are successful (Lynn, 1994; Milstein, 1992). As a result, the selection of principals has become less gender and racially motivated. In the past, being white and male was nearly a prerequisite to becoming a principal (Calabrese and Wallich, 1989). There have also been concerted efforts to decentralize and flatten the decision-making process by mandating (in many states) the creation of site-based decision-making teams that consist of teachers, parents, students, and administrators (David, 1994; Odden and Wohlstetter, 1995; Weiss et al., 1992). There have also been numerous efforts to encourage collaboration among community leaders, teachers, and school administrators (Calabrese et al., 1997).
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The principal’s experience

An alternative starting point is to conceptualize the framework of what is commonly believed to be true about principals and their work. Currently, the prevailing paradigm (Murphy, 1992) is to recreate the role of the principal into a reflective practitioner. This principal is a facilitator of people brought together for the common purpose of providing effective instruction. This recreated model is considered more dynamic, more in touch with the ideal reality of what theorists hope to be the prototype school administrator. It is considered more in line with the evolving demands of the principal’s role in contemporary society (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992; National Association of Secondary Principals, 1992).

This paradigm may not be reflective of actual experience. The school principal faces a far different job than the job envisioned by many theorists. Research indicates that the overwhelming majority of people who desire to become principals do so to make a difference (Crow and Glascock, 1995). Yet, when they make the transition from teacher to principal, it is as if a metamorphosis occurs. They take on the habits, language, and demeanor of the role they sought to transcend.

These experiences seem to abound. These new principals, filled with leadership knowledge from the university and selected because they had the right characteristics, are now confronted with the same issues that vexed their predecessors. Soon after this newness wears off, the faculty retrenches and constructive movement becomes a Skinnerian response to punishment or reward. It should be of little surprise that school administrators simply wear out or adapt to their situation and become maintainers rather than the conceptualized leader described in the literature (Norton et al., 1996).

Principals do not lose their leadership characteristics nor do they suppress their idealism. However, principals are filled with cognitive dissonance. That is, they know what theorists tell them to do; yet, the demands of the job require them to spend precious moments doing other things. These “other things” are centered in the interpersonal interactions that dominate their day.

Research demonstrates that nearly 88 percent of the principal’s day is filled with human exchanges. The rest of the day is spent on paperwork. In addition, the principal engages in 50 to 100 separate events per day and up to 400 separate interactions may be attached to each event (Manasse, 1985).

Lunenburg (1995) speaks of the rapid-fire nature of the principalship as the principal processes 150 events daily. Each event lasts a little more than five minutes. The principal’s day is unplanned, seldom aligned with any principles of time management, and requires continual adjustments to the unfolding drama of the school day. The principal’s world is uncertain. And as Schultz (1994) indicates, “In an uncertain world, there are no neat formulas of programmed sequences of steps that guarantees successful outcomes” (p. 175).

The principal’s world is hectic and unpredictable (Pitner, 1982). In a sense, it is a chaotic wholeness that flows in a fluid fashion – one that cannot be fragmented. As Ackoff (1981) indicated, “A system cannot be broken into independent parts” (p. 15). Each part is related to the other. The principal’s experience is linked by a theme which holds all of its components together. This theme which undergirds all that principals do is decision making. This is strongly supported by Simon (1957) who suggested that “A theory of administration should be concerned with the processes of decision as well as the process of action” (p. 1). Simon (1960) later suggests that decision making and management are essentially the same act. Heirs agrees (1987): “We are all decision makers by default; there is no other way to get through life” (p. xii). It is through decision making that the parts of the characteristics model are given life. Decision making is the fine thread which is woven throughout the fabric of the school day. Each interaction demands a response. Each response dictates a decision. In effect, the principal’s day is filled with the opportunities to create, in a
Absence of focus on decision-making assessment

It is ironic that preparation programs give scant attention to the art of decision making, or more precisely to the improvement of the quality of decisions that principals make. In fact, the educational literature is nearly devoid of “hard data” on decision making (Calabrese et al., 1996). Instead, it is filled with studies related to the collaborative nature of site-based decision-making processes. It does not quantitatively examine the qualities, consequences, or patterns of decision making (Calabrese et al., 1996). Although there is a lack of focus on decision making in principal preparation programs, this is not the case in teacher preparation programs. Here decision making is seen as central to the craft of teaching (Berman, 1987; Bolin, 1987).

In this sense, the literature related to school leadership and decision making explores affiliation activities but does not indicate attention to the assessment of the quality of decision making (Calabrese et al., 1996). Richardson and Lane (1994) warn, “The profession of educational administration can no longer tolerate the certification of future school leaders who make decisions using a ‘cookbook’ for problem solving. Principal preparation programs must move away from a ‘cookbook mentality’ to a ‘learning mentality’ in the preparation of school leaders with the ability to use critical analysis” (p. 14). Some have heeded this warning and made the case that decision making is a critical component in effective school leadership; that decision making can become a diagnostic and prescriptive model for preparation programs, staff development, and the selection of quality administrators (Daresh, 1997).

The focus on decision making as crucial to the principal’s craft offers a complimentary paradigm to other assessment and diagnostic models. This model is decision driven and operates on the assumption that effective organizations consistently make better decisions than less effective organizations. Schwartz and Griffin (1986) argue that “the context in which a decision takes place has a greater influence on the outcome than any personality traits” (p. 125). The assessment of decision making can be one indicator that, along with others, helps to paint a more complete picture of the principal’s diagnostic needs. This is supported by those who argue for multiple assessments to define individual competency (Reitzug, 1991). When focusing on decision making, a whole new theme emerges, one which considers history, context awareness of subconscious motivations, and impact (Schultz, 1994). History, as Purple (1988) points out, is the link between the past and the future. It creates meaning in the present and serves as the foundation of stories.
from which decisions are made. Decisions are not made in a void; they are interdependent and have lasting impact. Those who grasp how to make quality decisions understand the dynamics of leadership. As a result, the selection, screening, and development of principals can be significantly enhanced through the identification of the quality of decisions made by prospective or practicing principals.

Decision-making assessment

Although a review of ERIC test resources does not indicate any instrument currently available to measure the level of decision-making skills maintained by school administrators or prospective school administrators, decision-making assessment can be a critical component of principal preparation and ongoing development. A decision-making assessment should analyze five different decision-making components: one, decision-making patterns; two, decision-making identification; three, decision-making areas; and, four, decision-making criteria.

Decision-making patterns

Each person follows psychological patterns that have been ingrained within the individual during early formative years. These patterns have been forged to help individuals navigate their way through the world and make meaning of the varying contexts within which they find themselves. Janis (1989) believed that deep rooted, complex behavioral patterns form the basis of decision-making patterns. Thus, it follows that some individuals clearly develop (whether by accident or design of others who guide their formative years) a pattern of decision making that is more successful than others. In this sense, Janis (1992) offered a series of personality deficiencies that lead to poor decision making. These deficiencies include: hostility to the world, ambivalence, lack of control, low self-confidence, chronic optimism, excessive power and status need, chronic pessimism, dependency, desire for social approval, and poor coping styles. These negative personality traits are seldom observed in “normal” situations. However, in high-stressed environments, such as the operation of a school, some people revert to natural patterns of interpreting the world. It is in this context that decisions are framed. It is in the framing of decisions that the difference between the transformational leader and the transactional leader becomes one of different levels of operation. The transformational leader operates on a much higher level, and has a clearly identified set of heuristics that are able to motivate and guide an organization. Transactional leaders operate at a lower level with concern about rationalization and bolstering decisions (Burns, 1978).

Natural patterns of behavior are often suppressed in public forums. However, they are frequently made visible during times of stress. In terms of decision making, stress forces the decision maker to rely on a basic set of heuristics that are developed to make sense of the world. Fieldler et al. (1992) demonstrated that as stress increased, the quality of decision-making performance decreased. Thus, the inference is that many underlying heuristics may be faulty. The DMI attempts to create a stress-induced situation to bring to light the taker’s decision-making patterns. When one increases the amount of information to be digested and reduces the amount of time in which to digest the information to make a decision, a stress situation is created (Edland and Svenson, 1993). This forces takers to rely on personal heuristics to make most of their decisions. As a result, the DMI is able to make takers aware of their underlying heuristics involved in decision making and to prescribe possible interventions.

Decision-making identification

Analysis of decision making is driven, in part, by a medical model that requires the taker to become aware of the symptoms, causes, and sources of the problem that generate the decision context (Bradley, 1993). In this sense, as Barrows and Pickell (1991) suggest, the medical method requires a variety of employed strategies to arrive at the correct diagnosis or decision. There is an inquiry into the problem that leads to inductive or deductive reasons as to the causes and sources of the problem. There is the consideration of resources in terms of time and money. There is the consideration of the context. And there is a scanning of all relevant information needed to make a decision. In many cases, the best decision is to search for more relevant information if there is time to conduct such a search.

It is in the information search that those being assessed must search their knowledge base of heuristics to determine if there is a clear identification with the problem that is presented. Decision-making contexts need to be highly realistic to the taker since the actual role of the principal seldom allows the principal to delay decision making.
rather, it is one where decisions are expected quickly by teachers and students to maintain an organizational flow. Schools may be more clearly identified with the pace of the emergency room in a hospital than with the corporate headquarters of IBM. There is an ebb and flow to the activity. When there is activity, constant attention is demanded. Multiple decisions have to be made that move rapidly from problem identification, alternative generation, processing of consequences for each alternative, and the selection and implementation of the decision. Simon (1960) classifies this process succinctly by stating that “Decision making comprises three principle phases: finding occasions for making a decision; finding possible courses of actions; and choosing among courses of action” (p. 1). This process takes place in a matter of seconds. It follows that the decision maker who is able to rely on a highly accurate and evolved set of heuristics in resolving problems is much more likely to be successful than one who does not have such a set (Morton, 1991).

Schaffner (1985) sees this activity as highly consistent in the work of physicians. It is also applicable to the work of principals. Like the physician, the successful principal operates from a knowledge base of solution patterns. When confronted with a new problem, the principal or physician continually seeks to fit the problem against a heuristic solution. In aligning this pattern with the problem, the principal internally develops a context profile and then makes an assumption that the profile fits the decision solution.

Decision-making areas

A decision-making assessment needs to identify critical context areas. These context areas need to be interrelated and have high degrees of correlation. Each contextual area is a continued source of decisions required of principals. For example, context areas can include adolescent gang and cultural diversity issues. Kirk and Speckelmeyer (1988) suggested that each decision that a person makes is based on a problem that emanates from a specific context. These contexts range from abstract ideas and human values to information, economic, social or cultural issues. It is into these contexts that decision makers bring their attitudes, social norms, beliefs, intentions, and expectations (Davidson and Morrison, 1982). It is the discovery of these characteristics that tell us more about the decision maker than about the decision maker’s ability to recite how a decision should be made. This feature helps to examine prospective and practicing administrators’ depth in making decisions and as Richardson and Lane (1994) support, “Administrators must move from the concept of “push button decision making” to decision making which reflects understanding” (p. 14).

Decision-making criteria

Any decision-making assessment should be criterion referenced. Carroll and Johnson (1990) used this type of reference to classify conflicting reference points. These reference points are: purposive versus nonpurposeful, reasoning versus prone to error, problem solvers versus inability to solve problems, not seeking pleasure versus pleasure seekers, not driven by inner passions versus driven by emotions, consistent behavior versus inconsistent behavior, and quality decisions versus lack of understanding of quality decisions. Similarly Pena (1987) identified 17 programmatic concepts which act as the basis for making decisions in architecture. Organizations, such as schools and colleges of education, which use decision-making assessment should consider it as a diagnostic or a prescriptive instrument. They must be able to identify their value structure to make sure that there is an alignment between their value system and that of their decision-making assessment for the results to have internal meaning.

Utility of decision-making assessment

Decision making assessment has strengths and limitations. These are dependent on the type of instrument/process developed to do the assessment. One such instrument is the Decision Making Inventory (DMI) (Calabrese and Zepeda, 1996). The DMI has demonstrated that decision-making assessment can be time and cost effective. It is time effective because decision-making assessment can be completed in one half day (three hours). It is cost effective when compared to other more highly expensive diagnostic and prescriptive applications such as the NASSP Springfield Simulation and other assessment-center activities. Decision-making assessment using instruments such as the DMI can provide a variety of types of feedback. Feedback can include a comprehensive analysis, a comparison of scores with all takers, and an item by item analysis where takers are provided with a list of strengths and derailers inherent in the decisions they make. In another sense, the feedback
component has strong organizational implications. Decision-making assessment is used as part of an overall evaluation program for an alternative principal preparation program sponsored by the Chicago Public Schools (Project CALL).

Decision-making assessment has limitations. Although it appears to be an ideal tool to be used for the screening of applicants to degree programs or candidates for administrative positions, its focus should be solely diagnostic and prescriptive. Use of decision-making assessment for selection and/or evaluation can lead to litigation and destroy attempts aimed at personal professional growth. Second, decision-making assessment requires continued validation of problem contexts to meet the ever changing demands of the principal’s workplace.

Decision-making assessment is a model that needs to be considered by educators and faculty at schools and colleges of education. Decision-making assessment is consistent with the context of school leadership. The dynamics of school administration will not change. It is a fast paced, ambiguous, and event-filled context often with little observed connections between events. Each event demands an action. Each action demands a solution. Each solution demands a decision. In the end, it is the cumulative sum of these decisions that chart the direction of the school.

Summary

The principal, as a leader, must be a person filled with vision and the other traits associated with school leadership roles. However, any vision is useless unless the principal understands how to make decisions that lead to the fulfillment of the vision. A right vision guided by poor decision making leads to an abyss. A good decision maker rarely chooses a “wrong” vision because a person who is making good decisions for an organization is making them with one eye on the present and the other on the future. The consequences are always a consideration. Further, the characteristics model identified over two decades ago by researchers is a search for the ideal. Nevertheless, these ideal characteristics are discovered in the quality of decisions that the person makes. Everyone can learn effective decision-making skills, but the extent that this knowledge can influence these cognitive patterns may be highly individual. What seems to be possible is to identify those with an innate ability to make good decisions, assist them in refining those skills, and open doors for them to lead our organizations.

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