

Investigating the leadership styles and organisational effectiveness of middle management in an international school context.

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate leadership within mid-level management by exploring the leadership styles, management and organisational effectiveness of department leaders, in a bid to reform leadership within an international institution in Vietnam. This study is intent on providing a clear framework that will aim to reform mid-level leadership and management, develop a positive team culture within the organisation and, offer recommendations and resources to department leaders that will support the needs of practitioners. Participants included 1 senior leader (male: age 48 and British), 6 department leaders (4 male and 2 female: age range 32 to 44 and British) and 20 practitioners (6 male and 14 female, of which, 16 are British and 4 are Vietnamese: age range 25 - 40). Data was obtained using a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative tools, consisting of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collate contextual and subjective data based on the views and feelings of practitioners in relation to leadership within the institution. The data suggests that practitioners felt that a transactional leadership style was most associated to middle management, in which leader/follower relations are closely linked to supervision and driven by exchanges of reward or punishment, whilst members of middle management perceived their own leadership style to be most associated with a transformation leadership style, a style of leadership driven by

inspiring and visionary traits. The leadership style least associated with the leadership styles of middle management was authentic leadership, demonstrating only a small number of honest relations and only a few examples of ethical practice. This study confirms the need for authentic, process relational leadership, intent on providing support to teachers and learners throughout the institution. Otherwise, if leaders persist with transactional leadership models, closely linked to the 'systems control' approaches identified by Watson, (2005), institutional relationships will continue to deteriorate, staff retention will worsen and teaching and learning will begin to flounder (p.2).

Key words: International education, Vietnam, Educational leadership, Authentic leadership, Transactional leadership, Transformational leadership, Distributed leadership, Middle leadership.

Introduction

Given the competitive nature of private international educational institutions, there is a huge demand for effective leadership, not only from principals and senior leaders but throughout the many strands of leadership and management that exist. A number of studies, including works by Hansen (1996), Barnett (1992) and, Ogawa and Bossert (1995) have explored organisational administration and management in an educational setting but not so many have explored the social and cultural aspects of educational leadership and management until recently. Of those who have, research is mainly confined to higher education (Hoff, 1999; Seagren, 1993). Whilst

there is clearly a demand for mid-level management within education, Bush (2008) indicates that to appoint school managers without specific preparation is a gamble, and we should not gamble with children's education.

This study aims to investigate leadership within mid-level management by exploring the leadership styles, management and organisational effectiveness of department leaders, in a bid to reform leadership within an international institution in Vietnam, referred to as 'the institution' throughout the remainder of this study. Due to the re-structuring of staff roles, employment of new staff, enrolment of more students and an array of changes occurring, there is a constant need for staff and organisations to engage in ongoing adaptation and innovation. However, when implementing change, Scott (1999) suggests that there is often more failure than success, which can be damaging to staff and students, as well as costly to implement. As Bush (2008) proposes, there is a need to develop leaders at all levels and career stages. Therefore, this study will be beneficial to leaders in middle-management positions, senior leaders and prospective leaders, looking to increase their knowledge and understanding of educational leadership and management.

This research will seek to identify current concerns or issues that may be evident within mid-level management in the institution. The knowledge and understanding demonstrated throughout this study provide a clear framework that will aim to reform mid-level leadership and management, develop a positive team culture within the organisation and, offer

recommendations and resources to department leaders that will support the needs of practitioners.

Defining Educational Leadership and Management

Everand and Morris (1990, p.4) defined educational management as ‘setting direction, aims and objectives’. Occasionally, leaders, managers and teachers lose sight of what really matters in education and perhaps become distracted or pressured by the latest marketing or governmental demands. The purpose of education management is to ‘facilitate student learning and in doing so, to serve as a model for the learning process’ (Coleman & Bush, 2008, p.29).

When defining leadership and management, it is important to acknowledge that leadership and management are not synonymous with one another; one can manage without leading.

‘An individual can monitor and control organisational activities, make decisions and allocate resources without fulfilling the symbolic, normative, inspirational or educational functions of leadership’

(Schon, 1984, p.36).

Can educational organisations move away from the idea of management being a ‘maintenance activity’ and move towards a style leadership more associated with change, shaping goals, motivations and the actions of others? (Cuban 1988, in Bush 2008, p.6.)

Effective Leadership and Management in Education

There is growing recognition that the quality of leaders and leadership is critical if schools are to produce the best possible outcomes for their learners and their stakeholders. Those viewed as effective leaders, as defined by Block (1993), are those who understand their role in securing resources so that those they serve may effectively and efficiently perform their own responsibilities, whilst James et al (2006) describe some of the more charismatic elements of leadership, suggesting that highly effective schools need high functioning staff and communities who are inspirational and concerned with pupil attainment, whilst remaining sustainable.

Hattie (2010) identifies the nature of leadership as being the most important contributor for reasons for teachers staying in the profession, whilst as indicated by Vroom and Jago (1988), effective leadership relies on an innate ability to understand a situation, whilst possessing the capacity to assess the amount of cooperation or power sharing that is crucial for success and, in what capacity that interest ought to take.

Given the nature of international education, and the importance of education to stakeholders such as parents and learners, organisations require ‘committed teachers but they in turn, need the leadership of highly effective principals with the support of other senior and middle managers’ (Bush, 2008, p.1). Similarly, Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984) define five highly important factors that have huge implications on the well-being and improvement of an institution, they include technical skills and management techniques; humanistic, social and interpersonal resources; expert educational knowledge; moral and symbolic awareness of what is important; and the development of a unique culture.

However, regarding the initial concerns of the institution and providing impetus for this study, there is only little evidence of effective leadership within the institution. Based on empirical observations and experiences within the concerned institution, there appears to be a lot of autocratic leadership in particular departments or sectors, yet little participative or democratic leadership practice. Department leaders seem to exercise a large amount of control over their subordinates' practice and provide little opportunity for subordinates to contribute to decision making. Where there are signs of charismatic types of leadership, it may not be continued at its subsequent levels. Some members of the Senior Leadership Team within the institution appear to demonstrate qualities typical of those found in Transformational Leadership models, but such visionary and inspiring qualities may not be implemented at middle management level. The following section will aim to provide a critical review of leadership styles and management models within the institution whilst addressing their advantages and disadvantages, including the resulting environmental factors that have an impact on practitioners.

A review of leadership and management

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is based on the idea of the leader as a pivotal charismatic figure who is able to inspire followers through idealised behaviour, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass and Avolio, 1994 in Stoten, 2011). There are numerous problematic areas within transformational leadership including its complexities when being taught and trained and how it is dependent on sufficient

levels of interpersonal qualities and trait characteristics. Furthermore, theories developed by Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) suggest that a transformational leadership model is dependent upon one particular leader, with an abundance of positive motivational traits to drive a team of subordinates. The difficulties highlighted by Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) could explain some of the shortfalls that present themselves within the institution at middle management level. Although transformational models promote qualities built on inspiration, motivation and enthusiasm, they may be centrally driven by ulterior motives such as marketing ploys, perhaps intent on increasing student capacity or ensuring financial security. Whilst the transformational leadership model clearly has its strengths, it also has its limitations and as a leadership model on its own, it would not be as effective without the support of adoption of qualities typically associated to Distributed Leadership or Authentic Leadership, both of which will be discussed throughout the remainder of this section.

Distributed Leadership

Pearce and Conger (2002), define distributed or shared leadership as being ‘a dynamic and interactive influence process among individuals and groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals’.(p.3) Distributed leadership focuses on the interactions, rather than the actions of those in formal and informal roles. There is no doubt that school leadership is a social influence that should be shared if it is to operate successfully, but such a style of leadership needs to be administered successfully and collaboratively. It could be said that, if the distributed leadership model were to be implemented

ineffectively, it could therefore create a divide between subordinates and senior or middle management and, such a divide would inevitably lead to a lack of trust and respect. Additional limitations as defined by Stoten (2014) suggest that there is no explicit commitment to democratic or ethical ideas. Lumby (2003) has also criticised the idea that it may be a process of delegating responsibility that may not be mirrored necessarily by financial rewards or career progression.

Transactional Leadership

A transactional leader is neither a visionary leader nor are they leaders looking to inspire his or her followers. They are simply looking to 'maintain the status quo' (Hackman *et al.*, 2009, p.418). According to Stoten (2014), transactional leadership is characterised by clearly defined hierarchies that impart instructions from senior management to subordinates. Given the lack of opportunity for practitioners to develop professionally or contribute to broader educational aspects within the institution, it is clear that there are elements of transactional leadership within a number of departments within the institution. An investigation by Stoten (2011) found that Sixth Form Colleges where funding issues are paramount exhibited transactional leadership styles far more often than transformational, distributed and authentic models, acting pragmatically and instrumentally to achieve their short term goals. 'Examples of transactional leadership were often characterised by a domineering leader figure, a subordinated teaching staff and poor morale' (Stoten, 2011, p.3). Stoten (2014) also adds that transactional forms of

leadership are viewed as inadequate in dealing with the complex challenges that confront contemporary organisations or institutions.

Given the demand for ethical and moral actions within education, it is essential to adopt a more charismatic style of leadership, 'with the intent of producing a more committed and satisfied workforce in favour of more mechanistic models of leadership' (Stoten, 2011, p.4). Despite transactional leadership posing similarities with many of those manifested within the institution, as a leadership style it is in contrast with the ethical and moral aspects described by Gardner (2011), Cerit (2009) and Stoten (2011, 2014).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is built on sound ethical foundations and as George (2003) describes, authentic leadership is based on the authenticity of a leader and authentic leaders genuinely desire to serve and empower the people they lead through their leadership. Similarly, Begley (2001) links authentic leadership to the basic proposition of leadership, in that acquiring administrative sophistication is a function of understanding the influence of personal values on the actions of individuals and the influence of values and organisational and social practitioners. Further work by Ilies, Morgeson and Nahrgang (2005) also highlights the positive relationship between authentic leaders and the 'eudaemonic well-being' of followers.(p.386)

Additionally, Cerit's (2009) study identified strong positive relationships between authentic and servant leadership behaviours of school principals and teacher job satisfaction. Similarly, results

of a study by Walumbwa *et al* (2008), assessing five separate samples, revealed a positive relationship between authentic leadership and supervisor rated performance. Walumbwa *et al* (2008) addressed four key concepts associated with authentic leadership, including: self awareness (an ongoing process of reflection and re-examination by the leader of his or her own strength, weaknesses and values); relational transparency (open sharing by the leader of his or her own thoughts and beliefs, balanced by a minimisation of inappropriate emotions); balance processing (solicitation by the leader of opposing viewpoints and fair-minded consideration of those viewpoints); and internalised moral perspective (a positive ethical foundation adhered to by the leader in his or her relationships and decisions that is resistant to outside pressures).

Additional roles and responsibilities within middle management

In addition to leadership style, it is important to acknowledge the many roles and responsibilities of middle management members. Bennett (1983) highlights the importance and necessity for departments to be led effectively, suggesting that it is at the department level that the real institutional business gets conducted. (p.1) Hoff (1999) outlines a number of key skills, essential to the role of a department leader; they include: encouraging reflective backtalk and the ability to see the long view; the roles (figurehead, leader and liaison); relationships (both internal and external to the institution) in which the leaders are engaged; governance and organisational structures of schools, colleges and universities; the culture, the values and vision of the institution; strategic planning and financial management that is required.

Additionally, a number of vital roles, as identified by Fayol (1954), Gulick & Urwick (2012) and Adair (1988), include; planning, organising, coordinating, controlling, reporting and budgetting. Such roles require exemplary leadership and are crucial if a department is to operate successfully.

Research design

This section provides a brief overview of participants and data collection methods. The data obtained within this research is of pragmatic value to all concerned given the current climate associated to leadership within the institution. Despite the small sample, data was highly effective as it is specific to one institution, spanning across all key stages and a broad range of departments within the institution; an international school context in Vietnam. Therefore, data or results do not need to be generalised, although may be relevant to similar school contexts.

Participants

Participants included 1 senior leader (male: age 48 and British), 6 department leaders (4 male and 2 female: age range 32 to 44 and British) and 20 practitioners (6 male and 14 female, of which, 16 are British and 4 are Vietnamese: age range 25 - 40).

Data Collection

Data was obtained using a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative tools, consisting of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collate contextual and subjective data based on the views and feelings of practitioners in relation to leadership within the institution. The questionnaires and interviews were designed to address the research aims which included investigating the leadership styles and effectiveness of middle management within the institution, the roles and responsibilities of middle management within the institution and the professional development needs of middle management within the institution. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to further understand the interpretations and views of participants and to elicit feelings, perceptions and ideas of participants with regard to leadership within the institution. The many aspects of leadership and management are very much constructed through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. Given the complexity of human behavior and interaction, questionnaires and interviews were used to obtain specified, subjective and contextual data. Additionally, Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) argue that leadership practice is constructed in the interactions between leaders, followers and their situations. Or, as defined by Romm (2013), the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews within constructivism and interpretivism create 'constructive knowledge recognised to be a social construction created through an interaction between researchers and participants'. (p.660).

Findings

This section will present the data obtained from questionnaires and interviews completed by participating mid-level managers, practitioners and one senior leader. The data of participants will be categorised thematically with regard to the leadership styles, roles and responsibilities of their department leaders; their professional development needs as a practitioner; professional autonomy, control and autocracy; and organisational culture and teacher job satisfaction. This discussion will aim to offer practical and impactful recommendations that can be applied to a number of technical roles at ground level, in addition to ideas and recommendations that will aim to encourage leaders to reconceptualise and rethink the processes of leadership and management. It is common for researchers and scholars to critically review institutions and leadership styles within them, yet there are few who offer a remedy to reform such practice.

The data obtained through questionnaires suggests that practitioners felt that a transactional leadership style was most associated with middle management and authentic leadership was least associated with middle management in their school, suggesting that behaviours based on ethical values and honest relations, as identified by Gardner (2011), Cerit (2009) and Stoten (2011, 2014), are less common than those associated with transactional, distributed or transformational leadership styles. Findings support literature previously discussed in the *Review of leadership and management* section which describe a number of shortfalls in relation to middle management and their subordinates, including interpersonal relations, specifically, the lack of effective relationships within a group (Kouzes and Posner, 2011) and styles built on transactional or autocratic behaviours which are characterised by clearly defined hierarchies, a domineering

leader figure, a subordinated teaching staff and poor morale (Stoten, 2011). As a result of such behaviours, a number of practitioners developed an unwillingness to cooperate or apply a high level of effort. Those who were unwilling to cooperate stated that they only applied a minimal amount of effort when completing a task. Other practitioners still believed they applied a large amount of effort and stated that they completed their tasks to the best of their ability for the benefit of their learners, despite negative thoughts or feelings towards their department leaders. Practitioners felt that such feelings of demoralisation and low levels of effort did have an impact on student achievement. Practitioners wrote of their own and their colleagues' experiences, in which they lost the respect of their students. Practitioners admitted to feeling frustrated, occasionally lacking professionalism and becoming tardy within common practice, typically allowing children to 'get on with a task' of completing low order tasks that had not been planned. Practitioners sometimes lacked commitment to their roles in tasks such as assessment, planning, general organisation and maintenance, contribution to extra-curricular activities and timetabling. A lack of effort in such an important array of tasks will be noticed by learners, resulting in learners losing respect for their teachers.

Other comments, according to practitioners, suggest that there was also a feeling of separatedness between subordinates and middle management, whilst four practitioners said that they felt disrespected and that their roles as practitioners were not appreciated. These findings underpin the attitudes defined by Bulach, Boothe and Pickett (1997), specifically control-orientation and failure to delegate, which is in contrast to the features that contribute to a leader's success or effectiveness, particularly the ability to deal with others (Gardner, 1990).

It is evident that leadership within the institution would benefit from a more authentic approach, yet such a shift seems quite remote. Allio (2007) highlights the subsequent emergence of poor leadership and suggests that it can be averted if leaders will pay attention to the welfare of stakeholders, listen to alternative points of view and perspectives, rely on their team for support, foster a culture of integrity, and cultivate personal awareness. This notion, the strengthening and empowering of others is related to the long standing tradition of individual academic autonomy, which requires a department leader to develop a vision beyond immediate or menial tasks as previously discussed. This is essentially transformational leadership built on ethical, authentic values. Can leaders inspire their followers to ensure that the workload of each organisational member is designed to improve his or her professional status through the achievement of the shared vision, impacting on academic achievement, subordinate self-efficacy and teacher job satisfaction?

Control and autocracy

One of the most important flaws identified by practitioners and department leaders appeared to be the nature of control and supervision and the effects this has on teaching practice and performance. The work of Vroom and Jago (1988), cited earlier in the section *Effective leadership and management in education*, indicated that effective leadership relies on an innate ability to understand a situation and for one to possess the capacity to assess the amount of cooperation or power sharing that is crucial for success and, in what capacity that interest ought to take. Department leaders within the institution require more autonomy and freedom to lead their

teams, in order to really develop and allow them to achieve their potential as a unit. As educational professionals, we need to move away from the notion of a leader and followers, and focus on group processes and think of collaborators, all of which are consistent with the views of Barker (1994) and Rost (1991), thus providing a more grounded notion of leadership. As Foucault (1977) recognises, so long as power dominates thoughts of leadership, then it is difficult to move to another mindset and a remodeling of what leadership could be. Given the power relations that exist between senior leaders, middle management and their subordinates, we should be conscious of the potential difficulties that may occur within institutional leadership and management.

Developing awareness of teaching and learning

According to Cuthbert and Latcham (1978), department leaders are required to ensure the smooth delivery of teaching and learning within their department, which is quite refreshing considering that the majority of roles and skills previously identified are administrative. Findings suggest that there is little evidence of planning and staff development, with little or no intention of developing learners or teaching and learning. Practitioners within the institution also stated that they did not know that what they did as practitioners had an impact on learning. Hattie (2012) discusses the ways in which teachers in general think about their role and suggests that they should engender high levels of collaboration, confidence and commitment to evaluating their impact on students. School leaders must create a safe and rewarding environment in which the evaluation and collaboration process can occur. 'Presentism' coined by Jackson (1968; cited

in Hattie, 2012, p.169) relates to the relative emphasis on current and immediate classroom needs, problems and satisfactions instead of on long term impact and plans. In relation to practice within the institution, it appears that department leaders are more concerned with short term fixes than learner impact. Leaders should aim to encourage teacher engagement in rich conversation about learner effectiveness. An example of engaging conversation, as suggested by Hattie (2012) consists of questions such as: did students acquire essential knowledge and skills? How do we know? And how can we use that evidence of student learning to improve instruction?

Reconceptualising educational leadership and management

Barker (1997) argues that the ambiguity surrounding what we understand as leadership is central to the struggle of teaching leadership. As shown in the findings, leadership within the institution lacks clarity at both a senior leadership level and a middle management level, and where senior leaders attempt to teach leadership; values and beliefs are often contradictory, unethical and lack authenticity. Additionally, such styles of leadership are typically viewed as a systems control perspective of leadership, which promotes a mechanistic view of organisation and managerial work, seeing management as ‘an activity mainly concerned with designing and controlling work organisations’ (Watson, 2005, p.2). In order for senior leaders and middle management to view leadership in process relational terms, this involves a shift from seeing the organisation as a goal pursuing entity, as suggested by a systems control perspective of thinking, to thinking about the

organisation as “ongoing patterns of meaning making and activity, associated with people in relationships to others and to their cultures” (Watson, 2005, p.6).

Whilst department leaders believed their leadership styles were associated to transformational views, in which the leader controls and motivates subordinates to behave in particular ways consistent with the organisation’s goals, whether they are ethical and values driven or not, Hay and Hodgkinson (2005) address the need to “move away from the super hero status” and focus on leadership as an emergent process which includes the contributions of others and sees “leadership as integral to the organising and managing of work”. (pp.147-148) Similarly, the idea of an “exceptional, super hero figure at the helm of an institution” suggests little can be done in ways of teaching leadership. (p.149)

Both transformational and charismatic leadership styles can be seen to uphold “unitarist assumptions” (Watson, 2005, p.21), in that groups of subordinates follow a unitary view of the organisation. Although the strengths of charismatic leadership are clearly defined, there is risk of the team being united in achieving one goal, often losing sight of the main goal in education, teaching and learning. Such systems control thinking means that department members may be seen as less helpful in assisting managers to understand leadership as ‘they do not do justice to the complex reality found in organisations’ (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2005, p.146). Such views are often over-simplified and sometimes romanticised views of organisational life, particularly within an international educational context are common.

In order to move away from a systems control view of leadership, Baradacco (2001) suggests the importance of ‘quiet leadership’. (p.1), not to inspire or thrill, but to focus on small things, careful

moves and measured efforts, as one collaboratively with the team. Baradacco's (2001) views are more consistent with a relational view of institutional leadership. Additional research undertaken by Hiefertz and Laurie (2001) supports the notion of a more collaborative conception of leadership, not somebody who has all the answers, but somebody who can ask the questions and facilitate the resolutions. Given the views and beliefs of department leaders and practitioners within the institution, in that leaders follow a systems control model as opposed to a process relational model, this exemplifies the need for leadership education and similarities can be drawn with the work of Hay and Hodgkinson (2005), who also address the need to "remove the leader-follower notion, and the heroic leader from a pedestal" (p.150). Hay and Hodgkinson (2005) also suggest that leaders adopting a more process relational approach may be more prepared for the challenges they may encounter. There is also a need to encourage self-reflection and to encourage leaders to rethink processes of leadership and management, both within their roles within the institution and in relation to the broader concepts of educational leadership and management, which is vital for the transformation of short term organisational goals into a long term, sustainable leadership concept (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2005). Such a transformation may be achieved if leaders take on a critical perspective over leadership, and reflect upon and question leadership styles as opposed to simply adopting one. As has been recognised by Hay and Hodgkinson (2005) that leadership may be more usefully seen as a two-way process of influence, a focus on openness, learning and self-awareness may also be significant.

Conclusion

Given the growing market-oriented, international educational context of the institution being investigated within this study, it is clear that leaders tend to exhibit the behaviours usually associated with transactional leadership and pragmatic organisational performance rather than pursuing values driven agenda. Whilst it is also evident that senior leaders and department leaders beneath them are more concerned “with institutional survival and ensuring organisational effectiveness” (Stoten, 2011, p.383), as educational professionals, we need to move away from this assumption and aim to adopt a moral perspective. Until an institutional reform occurs, international educational institutions will be associated with low morale, low teacher job satisfaction, high turnover of staff and substandard teaching and learning.

As leaders are required to create and enhance their vision to meet the needs of the changing student population, the demand for outstanding leadership is also changing and growing. Bennett (1983, p.8) wrote, “The quality of leadership must be improved at all levels”. Although dated, it is still relevant, both within the institution and seemingly in a wide range of international educational institutions around the world.

This study confirms the need for authentic, process relational leadership, intent on providing support to teachers and learners throughout the institution. Otherwise, as identified by Stoten (2011), if leaders persist with transactional, systems control approaches, institutional relationships will continue to deteriorate, staff retention will worsen and teaching and learning will begin to flounder. Leaders must pay attention to upgrading skills through mentoring, reading, workshops, self-assessment and networking, but they must also begin to question their

understanding of the broader concepts of educational leadership and management. This paper will hopefully motivate and inspire leaders at senior level and within middle management to reflect upon their own practice. Reflecting upon one's own practice is essential and allows one to discover reality, as we, as educational professionals, strive towards openness, self-awareness and a collaborative, two-way process of leadership.

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