

Comparing Different Leadership Styles

Within the School Improvement Process

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Abstract

This paper will compare and contrast the school improvement process of my current school and the school where I taught five years ago; it will also compare the school improvement process of these two leaders with the school improvement process in our text book. To ensure that the identities of my subjects are kept confidential I will refer to the principal I worked with five years ago as Principal A, and the teacher I interviewed as Teacher A; Principal B and Teacher B work at the school where I am currently teaching. I also refer to the school that Principal A and Teacher A work at as School A. School B is where Teacher B and Principal B work. The assignment wasn't to interview two principals and two teachers, however, after asking my current administrator, Principal B, to answer my questions, via e-mail as per her request, weeks went by and I had gotten no response—so I felt it necessary to explore another candidate, Principal A. I received her interview back the same day as I sent it. After another week went by, Principal B turned in her answers to the interview. Now I had more data than I needed.

I had a choice to make—I could have easily discarded one of the interviews, which would have made my writing and assignment work easier to complete, or I could take the two interviews and the information in the book and compare and contrast them; a challenge I readily took, because I felt the two interviews showed drastically different ways to navigate the school improvement process from a leadership perspective.

Principal A's leadership style during the School Improvement Process is very similar to the leadership style championed by our text-book (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 359). Throughout the paper the main focus of comparison will be on the two different leadership styles of the principals at School A and School B.

Comparing Different Leadership Styles Within the School Improvement Process

First, I think we must begin by discussing what school improvement is and what it is not. It is what happens when a sustainable culture, concerned with the betterment of self, which focuses on the improved outcomes of teachers and students, is created. It is a continuous process which relies heavily on self-reflection, goal setting, developing plans to obtain training and resources needed to implement strategies which meet the goals/needs of the students and teachers involved in the process. Once the plan and strategies are implemented monitoring must take place so adjustments can be made to the plan as needed. The cycle continues and it doesn't end, if true school improvement is your goal.

School Improvement should not be an event. If it is an event, then the result is often not sustainable change. Let me tell you a story of two schools. School A and School B were in "School Improvement"—which meant that their SOL scores in Reading/Math were below the level to be considered making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). School A and School B developed plans to improve their schools. While the processes of plan development were radically different in School A than School B, at the end of the process the two schools had plans which were put into action and each school got out of SIP/met AYP standards. But historically School B keeps failing to meet AYP and is repeatedly in the process of "School Improvement" as defined by being in warning by the Virginia Department of Education. Why is that?

School B goes through the School Improvement Process in response to not meeting AYP. Then the state mandates goals for improvement. School B doesn't miss any valuable steps in the process, but they struggle because they drop the process after meeting their goal. The culture of school improvement doesn't continue at School B. All of the monitoring that went on before doesn't continue in years where they are not in School Improvement. For example, last year when School B was in School Improvement all teachers had a set way of writing lesson plans, objectives had to be listed in the room, and PLC's were dedicated to data analysis and goal setting. Pedagogical discussions took place, collaborative work happened, and growth occurred. But sadly, for School B, growth is not sustained because all these wonderful things which made positive change occur in the school are abandoned once AYP is achieved.

School A implements all the School Improvement components that School B adopts—and they meet AYP, and they continue to implement those strategies that work to help meet the needs of their students. They do not stop the School Improvement Process cycle once their school meets AYP. They adopt the process and it becomes a part of their culture. School A continues to make AYP year after year, but making AYP is only one indicator which speaks to School A's success as a school. One must delve into the cultures of the two schools to fully understand the struggle that School B has and why it is often difficult for lasting change to happen there (Sergiovanni, 2009, 349).

Some people will argue that the journey doesn't matter, that it's the destination that counts; but how you come to the end result matters much when referring to the School Improvement Process. School A involved the whole school, all grade levels and stakeholders, when establishing their goals. Each grade level examined the results of the SOL Tests and looked at each question with pass rates below 70% and compared the information with the curriculum they taught. They then developed a goal which would help them teach the content so students would know that information better and be prepared for the SOL test. Each grade level looked at the SOL Blue Prints and made sure this content was focused on heavily in the curriculum. The faculty at School A met in whole group twice a month and in grade groups weekly to discuss their progress. Each grade level developed pre and post-tests to assess the content and made plans to remediate during Power-Up time. Administrators created a schedule which held teacher planning time sacred and carved out a time for them to meet weekly with their grade levels to discuss student data and develop goals to ensure that student success could continue. Other stakeholders in the group helped make plans to meet needs such as providing students with enough to eat at home and developed a weekend meals program. Central Office and community members made sure parents became involved by donating snacks to be eaten at PTO meetings. Administrators got more parents to attend PTO meetings by embedding a child performance into each program—different grade levels performed each month. All stakeholders discussed and developed plans to improve student behavior and attendance. School A discussed the whole child and how helping the whole child in turn helped the whole school improve. Ideas which Faculty A brainstormed and wanted to become a reality were often sent to the School Improvement Team to problem solve ways to implement.

School B based their goals “on their data” (Principal B, personal communication, September 30, 2016). Three goals were picked by the state and the School Improvement Team decided on six more goals (Teacher B, personal

communication, September 21). School B never had a school wide meeting to look at the data. Only the School Improvement Team developed the goals. Only the teachers who taught the SOL grades (3rd, 4th, and 5th) knew what the goals were and about the plans which were to be implemented to help students and teachers meet the goal standards. “There was no parental involvement or community involvement” (Teacher B, personal communication, September 21).

According to Sergiovanni (2009) it’s important to let teachers have some control in how the changes will take place. It’s important to not manage the teachers in how they develop the plan—it is important they arrive at the desired outcome through their own planning (p.350). School A’s model was work intensive: there were more meetings, more discussions, and more planning and test development involved; but it was independent, self-lead work. Faculty A was given the autonomy to develop their own lesson plans as long as they had all the components required. Faculty A was allowed to develop their own pre and post-tests. By engaging in collaborative work they were becoming a collegial group which in-turn helped develop a culture steeped in reaching their full potential as both individuals and a body collective. As an educator, I look back at this time in my career with great fondness. I grew so much in my profession through this process. I still use the School Improvement Process Cycle in my everyday teaching. I constantly look at assessment data, make plans to improve, implement the plan, reflect on the plan’s effectiveness, and make adjustments to my teaching as needed.

School B, in comparison, did not involve the whole school in the action plan to achieve the goals. According to Teacher B the action plan to achieve the goals was developed by Principal B and the Co-Director of Curriculum and Instruction (personal communication, September 21, 2016). School B failed to meet the need for social interaction which fosters an acceptance to change (Sergiovanni, 2009, p.353). School A gave the teachers control of the School Improvement Process. Teachers were involved in every step of the process at School A. Faculty A and Faculty B were given clear expectations, but Faculty A were encouraged to make decisions which effected their work lives (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 353). School A also involved a plethora of stakeholders in the School Improvement Process, where School B did not. Teachers in School B where isolated from the other social groups which made up the extended school community. One of School B’s goals is to increase parental involvement in the school, yet the very thing which would bring this goal to fruition (inviting parents to help develop the School Improvement Plan), was not done! School B had an opportunity to build a coalition with all the interacting units of

change—the individual, the school, the work flow, and the political system by engaging its many stakeholders, and failed to do so (Sergiovanni, 2009, p.352).

After the goal and strategies were in place the School Improvement Plan had to be monitored. Both School A and School B used data to see if the implemented strategies were effective. Both schools used discipline data, STAR Reading, STAR Math, PALS, Mock SOL Scores, and Nine Week's Tests in grades third, fourth, and fifth. School A also looked at Kindergarten, First, and Second Grade data which included pre-tests, post-tests, PALS, STAR Math, and STAR Reading. School B looked at this data from Kindergarten, first, and second, but not as a tool for the School Improvement process, but as a tool for standard 7 of the Teacher Evaluation System and Smart Goal attainment. Principal A, when asked how the outcomes were evaluated, stated “outcomes are evaluated through discussion from the leadership team using the data listed previously” (personal communication, September 19, 2016). When Principal B was asked the same question, she responded, “we hold our breath and wait for SOL results” (personal communication, September 30, 2016). Even the teachers from School A and School B illustrate the difference in how one school thrives because they are internally accountable (School A) and how one school struggles because they are striving to be externally accountable when the internal structure lacks a foundation (School B.) Teacher A says that outcomes were evaluated by grade levels meeting weekly to discuss data and plans to remediate if needed. She states that the faculty met monthly to hear about how we were progressing with the plan (personal communication, September 20, 2016). Teacher B, like Principal B identifies an external indicator, “making AYP or not”, as the indicator of whether the outcome was successful (personal communication, September 21, 2016).

“Before schools can respond effectively to external accountability policies, they must first develop strong professional norms about what constitutes high-quality teaching practice...internal coherence around instructional practice is a prerequisite for strong performance” (Sergiovanni, 2009, p.356). School A took the steps necessary to help build a culture where its members bought into the necessity of change. Through conversations and plan development, they owned the process. They were motivated internally to achieve the goals they had developed. They measured their successes based on what was happening in their building. During this time the faculty participated in co-teaching, teacher to teacher modeling, and peer evaluations. Teacher A, wasn't asked these questions, but knows that the implementation of these programs helped the culture of School A develop in such a

way that enhanced the School Improvement Process and made change happen more smoothly. School A was able to build a culture of educators eager to implement new strategies so as a school they could continue to provide the best education possible for students.

Effective communication is a must for School Improvement to be successful and sustainable. Principal A and Principal B were both very effective when it came to communicating to teachers what the expectations were to be in compliance with the School Improvement Plan. The difference is that Faculty A developed the plan and were aware of the expectations because they helped create them. Faculty B was told/dictated the expectations, because many of them had not even seen the plan, and did not know the components of the plan. As the author of this paper, and a current member of Faculty B, I had not seen the plan until asking Principal B for the plan. School A's School Improvement Plan could be found in many places: in a binder in the workroom, the shared school drive, and the county website. School A's School Improvement Team also had hard copies of the plan. School B's Leadership Team had a hard copy and the county website had a copy. Principal B says that anyone who wants a copy of the plan can request one and she will send him/her a copy (personal communication, September 30, 2016). Teacher B, a member of the Leadership Team, contradicts Principal B and says "it's in Indistar and can be accessed by the principal and the Co-Director of Curriculum and Instruction" (personal communication, September 21, 2016). Teacher B does not report receiving a hard copy of the plan.

Sergiovanni (2009) describes school improvement as a process, not a series of reforms or events (p.355). The above paragraph speaks about School Improvement Plan availability, based on the nature of the school improvement process the document which outlines the plan is a living, breathing document which must be edited often to show the true course of actions. The plan must be easy to obtain and must also be easily changed to reflect the on-going process of school improvement.

Principal A and Principal B have different leadership styles. On the surface, both schools seem to be performing at the same level; but below the surface there are many differences. Those differences are mainly cultural. Principal A is dedicated to building teacher leaders. School A works to distribute leadership "because the work of instructional improvement is distributed (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 256). Principal A leads as a Scruffie, she uses her past experience and some intuition, as she leads others. Scruffies are good at readjusting the goals as new data becomes relevant. Thus, being a Scruffie leader has its advantages in the School Improvement Process.

Principal A easily, or appeared to easily, tackle the complexities of school leadership with ease. She functioned so well within dynamic groups, she appeared to thrive amidst the complex environment of School Improvement. Principal B was not dedicated to creating teacher leaders. She leads in Neat fashion. (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 256). The Virginia Department of Education had a plan and she implemented it to the letter. Being a school that is in danger of losing accreditation must be a stressful event for a school leader. I do not judge her leadership choices. I scrutinize them so I can learn on my journey to become a school leader.

What we must learn is that school improvement is an on-going process in healthy schools. The cycle of improvement should always be in action, if our goal is to sustain improvement. Positive school cultures develop when the stakeholders of a school participate in the school improvement cycle. At the core of that positive school culture is educators eager to implement new strategies so that the school can continue to provide the best education possible for students. From the outside looking in, we must understand that “knowledge is not necessarily where you think it is. It is typically assumed that low-performing schools don’t know what they are doing and high-performing schools have something to teach others” (Sergiovanni, 2009, p.356). School A has a very different school population than School B. School B has more special education students and more low-socio-economic status households. School B has greater absences per school year by the students than School A. School B has had four principal turn overs in the past five years, while School A has had one. So there are many factors in play when comparing the successes and failures of the two schools.

The recommendations I would have for my school, School B, would be to get teachers more involved in the creation of the plan. Involve them in setting the instructional goals of the School Improvement Plan. I think it’s important for every grade level to develop goals based on Standards of Learning data. It is unfair to third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers to shoulder this process and goal attainment on their own. What we do in the primary grades matter—so include them in the plan development process as well. I would also encourage Principal B to work on ways to build a culture of improvement through creating opportunities for her faculty to engage in collaborative work. Principal A did this when she had grade levels develop pre and post-tests together. The goal is to sustain improvement by creating a culture conducive to creating life-long learners committed to reaching their individual and collective potential.

References

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