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## MAKING A CHANGE: THE EFFECTS OF THE LEADERSHIP ROLE ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

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**ABSTRACT.** School is a very important element of society. Students and teachers learn many lessons, academic and otherwise, that influence their personal well-being and academic success. Often, however, school does not provide the positive learning or working environment that is most beneficial for our students and teachers. As a first year principal, Pepper realized that a more positive school climate was the key to confronting many of the challenges in the school where she worked. Through an autoethnographical approach supported by her personal journals, Pepper's experiences are described as she witnessed the negative effects that an authoritarian leadership style had on school climate and, subsequently, the morale and success of students and teachers within the school setting. As she made the change to a transformational leader, she came to realize that this leadership style had a more positive effect on the learning and working environment. Her change in leadership style and guidance, with input from teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members, resulted in the school becoming a more positive, caring place to learn and work for everyone involved.

**KEY WORDS:** change agents, leadership styles, principals' roles, school climate

The climate within a school setting has a great influence on the success of the teachers and students. Many times, teachers and administration fail to recognize that an administrator's leadership style greatly affects the climate and can create a learning environment that is negative and counter-productive. Through this autoethnography, the realizations and experiences of a first-year principal provide insights into her change in leadership styles. Her change to a transformational leader facilitated a change to a more positive learning environment for students and a more positive school climate for everyone involved. In turn, this provided more opportunities for success within the school.

### 1. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section contains a review of current literature describing the effect that school climate can have on the productivity and success of teachers and students in the classroom. It also provides evidence that the leadership style of the principal greatly affects, either positively or negatively, the learning and working environments for students and teachers.



### 1.1. *School Climate*

The environment in which we work and learn has a tremendous effect on how successful and productive we are. School is a very important element in our society that plays a major role in a nation's future. The school environment or school climate has an effect on the adults who work there, and therefore inadvertently can influence the academic success of the students as well. Each school has its own culture that shapes the climate of the building and sends a strong message to teachers and students about what is important in that environment (Wilensky, Ishler, Hutchison & Kindsvatter, 2000).

According to Hargreaves (1994), culture is the overall feeling of the school: the beliefs, values, and habits. It is the closeness of the staff, students, and parents. Culture is the way in which things are traditionally done. A professional culture of teaching promotes among teachers a climate of collaboration in which they work together by providing mutual support, offering constructive feedback, developing common goals, and setting realistic limits of what can be achieved. Hargreaves stated that the atmosphere in which a person works can certainly affect the quality of the job she/he does. This is true for adults and students alike in a school setting.

School settings characterized by mutual respect, high standards, and a caring attitude are more favorable for motivating learning (Arends, 1998). Further, teacher behavior greatly influences students' willingness to cooperate and try their best. Effective teachers convey the belief that students are able and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. Sufka and George (2000) found that students characterize effective teachers as those who establish a relationship or special rapport with the class.

Brophy (1998) advocated creating a school environment in which students and teachers feel comfortable, valued, and secure. This environment encourages school members to form positive emotional bonds with others and a positive attitude toward school, which in turn facilitates students' motivation to learn and success in learning.

### 1.2. *Leadership Role*

The principal's role as leader of the school has a profound effect on school climate. Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) found that principal support influenced the feelings that teachers have about themselves and their work. Further, teachers who characterized their principals as supportive found work more rewarding; enjoyed a productive, motivating work environment; demonstrated lower attrition rates and experienced less job-related stress and burnout. This in turn affected how successful their students were. Princi-

pals have the capacity to guide the positive progress of the school and to develop and nurture relationships within the school community that impact the overall climate (Day, 2000).

According to Littrell et al. (1994), in order to establish a positive school climate, principals should provide an atmosphere of optimism and camaraderie rather than an environment of competition and confrontation. Uniting the staff through a 'we' approach rather than a hierarchical approach helped teachers to feel esteemed and respected as well as committed to and satisfied with their jobs. Principals who emphasize emotional support in their daily work activities interact frequently with teachers in a manner that shows mutual respect and caring – a strong message sent to students when they witness this relationship between the principal and teachers.

Transformational leadership, a relatively new term to the education field, was introduced to assist in restructuring initiatives designed to take schools into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Leithwood, 1992b). Transformational school leaders are characterized as having three fundamental goals: (1) helping staff develop and maintain a collaborative, professional school culture; (2) promoting teacher development; and (3) helping the school community solve problems together more effectively (Leithwood, 1992a). Culture building by transformational leaders includes behaviors aimed at developing school norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions that are student centered and support continuing professional growth by teachers (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999).

Leithwood (1992b) reported that school administrators must focus on using facilitative power to make changes in their schools. This is a form of power that is accomplished through using the strengths inherent in the people of the organization in a collaborative nature, not by making demands and ruling over them. This type of power arises when teachers are helped to find their work more meaningful, to meet higher-level needs through their work, and to develop improved instructional capacities. Transformational leaders provide such a focus. The collaborative relationship and success that comes from transformational leadership empowers those who participate in it. There is hope, optimism, and energy in a kind of leadership that facilitates the process of change, the refocusing of the school toward higher collaborative goals, and a renewal of the commitment toward success for students, teachers, staff, and parents.

Leithwood et al. (1999) identified teacher commitment as a key aspect of a school's capacity for change. MacDonald (1991) stated: "It is the quality of the teachers themselves and the nature of their commitment to change that determines the quality of teaching and the quality of school improvement" (p. 3). Often, a teacher's age and length of teaching experi-

ence can have a negative effect on commitment to change. However, Smylie (1990) found that other factors could influence teachers' commitment to change in a positive way. These include teachers' decision-making power in the school, parental involvement in the school, and the school's climate.

Glasser's (1992) concept of lead management is a form of transformational leadership. Brophy (1998) described lead management as a more positive way to manage:

Lead managers motivate by reinforcing rather than punishing, showing rather than telling, empowering rather than overpowering, and emphasizing cooperative work toward shared goals rather than rule reinforcement. Lead managers are more likely than boss managers to elicit cooperation and empower others to assume responsibility for controlling their lives at school. (p. 22)

Greene (1994) related how Glasser's management concept helped to improve the school where he was principal. He told that many different staff development programs for improvement had been implemented within the school but none of them lasted for over a year or two. He came to realize that these programs dealt with ways to improve teachers, to make students conform and become better learners, or to correct student behavior. These approaches were aimed toward improving the students and teachers rather than working with these groups to improve the environment. The key to change in this school was a massive paradigm shift. They changed to a more collaborative approach in which others shared in decision making for improvement. Greene stated that they "learned to see things in a different way and adopt new paradigms so that their attitudes and their behavior changed, thus leading to increased quality in their relationships, the school environment, and the students' school work" (p. 36).

The importance of a positive school climate is evident from the research presented. The role of the principal in establishing a positive climate has also been confirmed. Greene's account of using transformational leadership provides evidence that its facilitative nature creates a more positive school climate. The present study aimed to reveal one principal's journey from an authoritarian leadership style to a transformational leadership style. In addition, the process of change, as the school moved toward becoming a more positive learning environment, is discussed.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted using an autoethnographical approach that incorporated the use of the researcher's personal journals in data col-

lection. An autoethnography is closely related to an ethnography. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) define ethnography as a first-hand, intensive study of a given culture and the patterns within that culture. One characteristic of ethnographic research is its focus on studying the natural settings in which culture is manifested. Also, in studying the setting, attention is paid to all aspects that might reveal cultural patterns. Culture is the central concept of ethnographic research. Educational ethnographies often involve study of a particular group of people who work together while sharing experiences and values.

A further expansion of ethnographic research is through autoethnographic study. Burdell and Swadener (1999) revealed that this is an emerging genre in educational scholarship. A genre in which “there is a movement away from distanced theoretical writing to writing that details the individual and imaginative aspects of agency” (p. 22).

Reed-Danahay (1997) describe an autoethnography as an investigation of self within a social context. In this genre, many researchers keep a personal research journal documenting activities and realizations as they work through a study. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain that this approach provides the opportunity for researchers to intertwine their personal experiences with the professional aspects in an attempt to sort out their findings.

Thus, an effective approach for offering a panoramic view of the effects of leadership styles on learning environments is through autoethnographical research using personal research journals as tools for data collection. This qualitative research approach used by Pepper yielded rich documentation of the effect of leadership styles on the learning environment and the process of change, and how a change to a transformational leadership style positively affected administrator, teacher, and student performance.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. *Pepper's Story: A Principal's Decision to Change*

Several years ago, I was hired as principal at Junction Elementary School. I had taken the necessary coursework to be certified in educational leadership, but had no practical, on-the-job training. This Grade K-5 school was in a low-income, urban setting with approximately 400 students. A portion of the teachers and other staff had been employed in the school for several years. I soon learned the dilemma of being in an unfamiliar cultural setting and in a job that I was untrained to carry out.

During the first year, I hired 11 new teachers for a staff of 18. Six of these teachers were first-year teachers with no concept of the background

of the students whom they would have in their classrooms. The other new teachers to the school had experience ranging from one to 28 years and varying degrees of knowledge about the background of the students. In addition, the head custodian and the lunchroom manager were new to the school. Previous principals had used very authoritarian methods to direct teachers, other staff, students, and parents. Almost from the beginning, there seemed to be an underlying distrust between the veteran staff and the new staff members. As a new, inexperienced principal, I attempted to rule the school with a firm hand, dictating orders about how things would be and attempting to make changes that I felt would be for the better.

After serving as principal for a short time, I was aware of a growing concern for low student achievement, discipline problems, lack of parental involvement, and an undercurrent of discontent among the teachers, other staff, and students. I realized that this was not the type of positive environment that was most beneficial to student achievement and teacher satisfaction. I made many unsuccessful attempts, through staff development, modeling, evaluations, and discussions with the staff to attempt to make improvements. Finally, I had to admit to myself that things were not getting better. Morale was low and there was a great deal of frustration within the school.

It was time for me to step back and reevaluate my position as leader. Out of frustration, I began searching for a better way to manage the school environment. A search of the literature led to some unexpected findings that changed the focus of my concerns. This change of focus and much soul searching led to the conclusion that my frustrations were stemming from my misconceptions about the need for a positive learning environment and the need to change my leadership approach. These powerful lessons learned provided a scaffold on which the staff would grow and evolve professionally, and it led the way for change to a more positive school climate. It wasn't until much experimentation and growth on my part that I understood how these concepts go hand-in-hand in building the type of school setting that is important for success.

### *3.2. Positive Learning Environment*

My first concern centered around improving the atmosphere and climate within the school. I wanted it to be more positive and more conducive to learning and working. It was obvious to me that the leadership style which I had adopted was not effective in creating the type of environment necessary for students and teachers to be successful.

How, as principal, could I establish the positive environment necessary to be successful? Transformational leadership seemed to be an answer. I needed to move the teachers and other staff toward a more collaborative, collegial stance. I needed to encourage the growth of an environment that had the success of the students at the core and assisted the teachers in developing professional knowledge and relationships that were more effective in reaching this goal. I decided that I would incorporate Glasser's (1992) ideas of lead management into my new approach to leadership.

After a great deal of reflection and soul searching, my outlook on Junction Elementary School began to change. I understood the place that a positive learning environment would play in the success of the students and understood the need for my leadership approach to change in order to make an impact on the performance of students and teachers. Now, how would I begin the process of leading the teachers and staff in establishing the type of environment in which everyone would work together as a community? I couldn't *tell* them they had to change and expect them to be effective. That was not lead management. I realized that, because the climate of the school was neither collaborative nor very positive, it would be difficult to gain the support and trust of the veteran teachers. I had to begin slowly the process of building rapport within the teachers and other staff, developing a shared vision, and setting the stage for shared decision making. I had to move slowly in demonstrating to the teachers that I honestly wanted them to take on decision-making roles within the school, and that their ideas and decisions for change would be honored and upheld. I had to build trust.

### 3.3. *Making the Change*

After much reading and reflection, I determined that I had to change my tactics in leading the school. Through professional development provided by the school district, additional understandings of Glasser's (1992) concepts of lead management began to formalize as the leadership option that I preferred. Fullan (1988) stated that the starting point for change is not system change, not change in others around us, but change in ourselves. Change and growth in ourselves show a commitment to improvement. Modeling your own beliefs and ideals is much more important and effective than merely telling others how things should be. I started the process of change by myself because I felt that I needed to know and understand the concepts before introducing them to the teachers and other staff.

Working with the students who were sent to the office for discipline problems proved to be fertile ground for trying out the new leadership style.

At first, the students were unsure of my new approach to behavior management. Corporal punishment had been the traditional approach for discipline in the school district; however, the superintendent had banned the use of corporal punishment the year before I took over as principal. Through discussions, the students gradually began to realize that I was interested in their problems and in providing them with the opportunity to be responsible for their own behavior. The students and I began to develop relationships of trust and understanding.

One particular student whom I remember was a fifth grader named Matt. He had begun to interact with members of a local gang in the apartment complex where he lived. This experience seemed to have an influence on his behavior at school. Matt had been through the juvenile courts at the age of 12 years for car theft. He had little respect of others and seemed to trust no-one. Matt was referred to my office when he threatened a teacher. After several sessions, Matt began to talk with me about his family situation, home environment, and feelings about school. A trusting relationship began to develop between the two of us. When that bond of trust began to develop, I was then better able to understand and work with Matt to improve his attitude with teachers and other students. As a result, his academic performance began to improve and his inappropriate behaviors decreased.

Over time, I realized that I knew much more about the 'problem' students and their backgrounds than their teachers. These students did not mind coming to my office because they trusted me to be fair and they understood that I was willing to listen to them and their concerns. These visits to my office seemed to help them to meet some of the needs identified by Glasser (1992). At times, some of the students left their classrooms and came to the office when they realized that things were getting out of hand for them. They realized that they needed to remove themselves before the situation went too far. I felt that this was a positive move on their part because they were beginning to take responsibility for their behavior. Some teachers, however, felt that the students should not be able to leave their classroom without permission. These teachers were not accustomed to this approach and thought that I was being too easy with the students. I heard through the 'grapevine' that they expressed these concerns openly in the teachers' lounge and parking lots.

Nevertheless, I felt confident that this more caring, respectful approach to discipline was a very positive way in which to work with students to facilitate improvements. I was also confident that the same approach would apply to working with the teachers and other staff in making a positive change in the school climate. I knew that teacher morale was low and that many teachers had voiced frustration at the way things were in the school.

They were ready for a change and I began trying my hand at being a transformational leader.

Taking the plunge, I called a meeting of the teachers and other staff to open the discussion for changes that were needed in the school. Suggestions were slow to be offered because of the lack of trust within the school but, eventually, pent-up frustrations and concerns began pouring out. One of the concerns expressed was my approach to managing the students. This gave me the perfect opportunity to explain my approach to managing the students and why I felt that it was working. Several of the teachers commented that they had seen a difference in some of 'our problem students'. This conversation further opened the door to discussion of how the teachers could work together to make positive changes in the school. The teachers talked about the function of committees that were established within the school setting and how the planning and implementation of the purposes of these committees could make a difference. This led to the discussion of collaboration and shared decision making. That meeting was a huge step in my move toward becoming a transformational leader. At times, I felt myself becoming defensive and intimidated by the things that were being said, but I knew that the behavior I modeled during this meeting would set the stage for growth as a collaborative organization.

The teachers and other staff began meeting often to discuss changes that were necessary and improvements that were being made. Knowing that there would be skepticism among some of the veteran teachers and other staff, I made sure that successes were celebrated at every opportunity. I also planned opportunities for new and veteran teachers to work together on projects so that they would get to know each other on a more personal level. The changes that were taking place within the school were discussed with the custodians and lunchroom staff so that they would understand and could take part in establishing the more positive school climate. A small cadre of teachers was willing to try Glasser's (1992) approach to behavior management in their classrooms. Most of these teachers were those new to this school setting and inexperienced with the students' cultural backgrounds. Many of the teachers were first-year teachers who were eager to help the students succeed. Perhaps the first-year teachers had not yet been jaded by the realities of the classroom as seen through the veterans' eyes.

One of the PTA meetings for the school year was devoted to an explanation of the attempts to create a more caring environment in the school. The teachers explained to the parents that they felt that this would assist in improving student achievement and easing some of the tensions that developed when students were angry and unhappy. The parents seemed eager to embrace what was being attempted.

A site-based management team was established at the school to assist with decision making and planning for the future. Members of the team included teachers, staff, parents, and owners of local businesses. The opportunity to have input into the future of the school had a positive effect on the relationships involved and gave the different groups some ownership in the growth of their community.

### 3.4. *Effects of the Change*

I served as principal in the Junction Elementary School for four years and then moved to a new position. During that time, I kept a personal journal of the events that took place to help as I reflected on the effectiveness of the changes. Improvement in the school was evident during that time. Gradually, the climate of the school did change to become a more caring, positive place to work and learn. One way in which this became evident was that the number of discipline referrals and teacher complaints decreased by over 20%. This was a huge improvement. Teachers also began working more closely together on projects and grade-level planning.

In addition, an increase of test scores by 3% was celebrated. This could seem to be a very small amount, but we were very pleased that our students' academic success had begun to rise. There were many factors that influenced our students' academic success. Some of these we could alter, and some we could not. We made many changes within the school to accommodate our students to ensure success. However, many of our students did not have a home environment that promoted their academic success. We worked very hard to increase parent involvement within the school. As noted by sign-in sheets in the school office, more parents did come to the school to work with their children's teachers. The teachers and I began to realize the change in parents' attitudes, especially parents who previously had been very defensive of their child's behaviors. These parents were more willing to discuss solutions to problems in an open, civil manner. But there were still many parents whom we were not able to entice to the school to work with us.

Teachers reported that students helped their peers work through problems without the assistance of adults. In addition, the fourth and fifth grade boys who had been interacting with the negative influences in the apartment complexes were easier to relate to and reason with based on the smaller number of referrals and students sent to alternative settings. The teachers still had work to do with these students, but there was a more positive relationship between the fourth and fifth grade boys and the teachers who used Glasser's (1992) ideas. Teachers were at varying degrees of acceptance and use of this approach. Generally, it seemed that the younger

teachers embraced the opportunity to share in decision making and collaboration. It also appeared that the teachers using Glasser's management concepts had more positive relationships with students. Not all staff members had embraced the change, but the staff realized that it was a slow process and only time would continue to improve relationships within the school.

In addition, I am pleased to note that, of the 11 new teachers to the school during the first year when I was principal, six teachers have moved on to leadership positions themselves. Three of the teachers are now principals within the school system and a third is an assistant principal aspiring to have her own school one day. One teacher is the 'master teacher' within Junction Elementary School and shares in administrative responsibilities, while yet another teacher is now a district reading coordinator. This is further evidence that providing a facilitative environment, which allows teachers to assume leadership roles and participate in problem solving, enhances professional growth and job satisfaction.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Pepper's story confirms the findings in the current research related to the effect that school climate can have on the learning environment and the role that leadership styles play in establishing a positive school climate. It also documents the ways in which school climate affects teacher morale and attitudes which, in turn, can affect student achievement and attitudes. Her story leads the reader through the process of change within a school setting and provides insights into obstacles and possible solutions for meeting challenges. It provides a real-life foundation for other school administrators and staff to refer to as they move through the process of school improvement and change.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Tirozzi (2001) calls for the principal's role to shift from a focus on leadership and administration to a focus on leadership and vision. The principal's role must serve to facilitate the teaching and learning process so that students and teachers will succeed in their endeavors. Transformational leadership seems to be the key to achieving this positive learning environment.

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