Reframing as a Best Practice: The Priority of Process in Highly Adaptive Decision Making.

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March 24, 2008

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Abstract

The development and practice of a well-defined process in which decisions are fully contemplated is needed in education today. The complexity of societal issues requires new depths of understanding, appreciation, and communication. Framing refers to the way a situation is described or viewed; reframing is the process of expanding and enriching the situation to gain multiple perspectives and meanings. Convenience and immediacy have been the underpinnings of educational decision making for too long. Educators tend to single-frame, or in other words, make decisions based on just one perspective. The strong influence of school cultures require quality decisions born of a process that is reflective, deliberate, and effective. Reframing strategies provide a broader worldview with critical meanings to augment the process.

Introduction

School reform efforts demand that schools become places of excellence for all students. The challenge of improving schools must be shared by administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Central to this reform is not only the involvement of faculty in decision-making but also the process by which decisions are rendered. This initiative involves changing the way educators relate to each other, to students, to parents, and to the communities at large. Banks (1991) noted,

> An effective teacher education policy for the 21st century must include as a major focus the education of all teachers, including teachers of color, in ways that will help them receive the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to work effectively with students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social class groups. (p. 135)

Whereas the American educational system absorbs an ever-increasingly diverse student body, a critical challenge may lie in understanding both the threats and opportunities before us. Decision-making processes are under critical review as educators seek new strategies.

Slattery (1995) concluded that social values are meshed with educational decisions, and not until we begin to examine societal problems will we understand the decision-making process of educational institutions. Furthermore, Senge (1990) contended that, “people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). Allen (2000) noted that if process is given priority over goals in decision-making, it unleashes creativity. A new dynamic emerges as students, teachers, and administrators become a community of learners and decision makers. The potential of this new dynamic is limited only by the resourcefulness of its stakeholders. Effective programs are the product of a process, not rooted in bureaucracy but rather in people.

As a result of societal changes, organizations must learn to recognize and adopt new

paradigms. Schools must be especially sensitive and accommodating to stakeholder problems. Murphy and Hallinger (1992) noted that the emerging decision-making processes require exemplary people skills and the adaptation of problem-solving strategies. Principals and teachers must develop effective strategies for contending with the fast-paced, contemporary school environment. Preconceived directives or plans of action that are consistent but insensitive to stakeholders fail to provide critical decisions. Palmer (1983) stated that we should "create a classroom practice that would teach us not to rearrange the world but to learn its intricate relationships" (p. 38).

The Priority of Process in Decision Making

This priority of process is a theme repeatedly mentioned in research. The process by which principals and teachers seek to understand and appreciate people is critical to their success. Heckman (1993) has observed that a school's culture is embodied in the distinct beliefs of its administration, teachers, and students. Educators must be willing to evaluate and reassess their processes within a pluralist society. Cochran-Smith (1995) noted,

> In order to learn to teach in a society that is increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, prospective teachers, as well as experienced teachers and teacher educators, need opportunities to examine much of what is usually unexamined in the tightly braided relationships of language, culture, and power in schools and schooling. This kind of examination inevitably begins with our own histories as human beings and as educators; our own experiences as members of particular races, classes, and genders; and as children, parents, and teachers in the world. (p. 500)

As noted by Katz, Noddings, and Strike (1999), justice and care are societal principles which are not mutually exclusive in policy development. Caring means taking time "to talk to the participants, to see their eyes and facial expressions, to size up the whole situation" (Noddings, 1984, p. 84). Furthermore, Noddings stated, "when we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects from us…our attention, our moral engrossment is

on the cared for" (p. 24). The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as "what is important." A principal who acts with care and concern for others is more likely to develop a school culture with similar values.

Zaccaro, Marks, O'Conner-Boes, and Constanza (1995) identified three types of knowledge required for problem solving: (a) a full and proper understanding of the task, (b) knowledge of the organization; and (c) knowledge of the people surrounding the problem. Schuler (1989) describes this process as, "the deliberate attempt to provide teachers with the right, the resources and the responsibility to make sensible decisions and informed professional judgments that reflect their circumstances" (p. 1). The manner in which teachers and principals structure questions is an insightful process that reveals personal values. In the construction and eventual consideration of a question, processes are enacted. The criteria for framing the question must be decided, followed by determining what will be the prevailing perspective and information source. In framing questions, it is the person, knowledge, and skills that make decisions effective. In framing, decision makers can learn to employ multiple perspectives in which they gain additional insights regarding an issue. "In short, an essential factor in leadership is the capacity to influence and organize meaning for the members of the organization" (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 39).

The Inadequacy of Traditional Decision-Making

Adler and Borys (1996) identified two bureaucratic structures, enabling and coercive, that have profoundly influenced organizations. Schools with enabling structures empower people through their organizational structure. Coercive structures attempt to control people. Sweetland (2001) found that "rules that give teachers latitude to make reflective decisions rather than coerce them to conform to rigid bureaucratic procedures are not only possible but empowering to

teachers" (p. 581). Schools, like other organizations, have either an enabling or coercive structure, which can potentially impact the processes of decision-making.

> Traditional decision-making models offer students a distorted picture of reality, for when people make decisions, they normally do so with inadequate information, under circumstances less than ideal for contemplative analysis, and within a social context with a variety of societal, emotional, and ideological preconceptions. Rarely does anyone make a significant choice that affects him or her alone, and rarely does the decision maker decide without outside pressures impinging significantly on that choice. (Allen, 2000, p. 5)

Bolman and Deal (1997) noted the inability of certain people to use reframing strategies: "too often, psychic prisons prevent seeing old problems in a new light or finding more promising tools to work on perennial challenges" (p. 5). Reframing offers a specific cognitive process in which decisions are contemplated through multiple perspectives. Andero (2000) stated, "Decisions are not often based on careful analysis of content in the disciplines and on societal needs, or on studies of the learning process and concerns of learners" (p. 276). Lashway (1996) found that people frequently address the challenge of a new position and responsibilities with old assumptions. Critical to the success of decision-making processes is the ability to lay aside old perspectives.

> The temptation faced by administrators is to use the structure, including rules, regulations, and policies, to force compliance and conformity rather than to create situations where teacher professionals make reflective decisions based on professional judgments. (Sweetland, 2001, p. 6)

Sweetland suggested that individuals frequently embrace the status quo and fail to become the agents of change in their schools. Sheperd (1995) observed that "a form of functional fixedness can arise such that a teacher may find it difficult to produce alternative courses of action in response to changing classroom conditions" (p. 509), and therein is the problem.

Another possibility is that educators return to frames of convenience or popularity to make decisions. In noting the political tendencies of teachers, Blase (1991) stated, "by and large,

teachers designed political strategies that were considered accommodative; these strategies were largely reactive, protective, and non-threatening responses to the work styles of principals" (p. 350). When educators develop strategies to expand their decision process to new possibilities, they begin to recognize the value of new ideas and move away from predictable responses and traditional ways of acting. However, decisions may be rendered without educators engaging in a deliberate reframing process; thus, the formation of an insightful strategy for decision making may fail to manifest itself.

The processes whereby educators frame their decisions and adopt strategies for decision making are critical to the quality of decisions rendered. It is an identification of the cognitive processes of framing from which educators develop their perspectives. The ability to understand one's own framing process promotes self-understanding. There is an added dimension of being able to reframe; to see the perspective of others is a process that opens an individual's intellect to the culturally diverse society around him or her. The quality of a decision depends upon its appropriateness in a situation or specific context.

While educational reform has brought shared decision making to the forefront of contemporary thought, it has not enhanced the decision-making processes of principals and teachers. While decentralization provides teachers with an increased role in decision making, it has failed to nurture a process that generates new viewpoints and potential strategies for the onslaught of issues facing schools today. Bolman and Deal (1997) stated, "too often they bring too few ideas to the challenges they face" (p. 4). Efforts to change public schools have focused on highly visible problems such as decision-making authority.

Cuban (1984) referred to these as "first-order" changes that fail to detect the cultural values and perspectives of people. Patterns of behavior have meaning and provide continuity for

institutions but are also the source of many problems. Any alteration to established patterns of behavior involves “second-order” changes, and rarely have reformers entered this mode. Until principals and teachers identify their decision-making processes and recognize the patterns of assumptions, old thinking, and convenience, their decision-making skills are suspect (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

The Effective Strategy of Reframing

Reframing presents new ideas for both principals and teachers in their decision-making roles. “Reframing refers to the process of changing the focus of a situation or problem and examining it from a different perspective. It involves looking at the reciprocal side of a an issue or analyzing a situation from a broader sense” (Chandler, 1998, p. 360).

Bolman and Deal (1997) identified four frames of reference from which organizations may be viewed. The *structural frame* is authoritative and respects the defined roles, specific responsibilities, and formal roles of constituents within the organization. The *human resource frame* is more deeply rooted in psychology, as the individual’s feelings, psyche, needs, and abilities are paramount. The organization is seen more as family rather than a hierarchal structure. Acknowledging and nurturing relationships is critical. The *political frame* denotes the reality of conflict as members of an organization advance their agendas. The political frame is the arena where perspectives are played out as members express themselves through ideologies. The *symbolic frame* is steeped in tradition. It is the collection of events and histories that identifies and distinguishes an organization.

Wimpleberg (1987) conducted research into principals’ frame usage and found that principals who excessively relied on the structural frame had less effective schools. In contrast, those principals who learned to use multiple frames had schools that were more effective.

The complexity of organizations makes it difficult to understand organizations and thus organizational change. In order to appreciate the depth and complexity of organizational life, one needs to look to an organization through frames.

Reframing is the capacity to view a situation from more than one frame. To view all organizational problems through just one frame will result in misunderstandings and perhaps inappropriate actions. Bolman and Deal (1997) contended that individuals see the world through a lens or frame. Their four-frame model explains how individuals can view organizations through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses or frames. They argued that many of us use only one or two frames and that this limits our ability to act as effectively as if we used all four frames. They suggested that leaders need to use all four frames. Leaders must develop the ability to "reframe" situations in order to make sense of what is taking place in their environments and to create alternative solutions and strategies. The most effective leaders integrate the frames into their thought patterns and behavior. The leader should be flexible and adaptable enough to use all four frames and become a multi-frame thinker, rather than relying simply on one frame for looking at the world.

While organizations have grown increasingly complex, so likewise has the process of understanding perspectives. An understanding of this process is purposeful. The dichotomy of leadership and administration is changing as principals seek to understand the impact of culture upon schools today. The uniqueness and individuality of each person is a gift, not a curse. In taking time to know the individual, we learn not only about him or her but also about ourselves. An identification of the cognitive processes from which perceptions are developed and decisions are made is essential. Gaining an understanding and appreciation for all stakeholders simply

enriches the decision making process. In this context, decision-making requires a constant vigil in which educators first seek to understand people, processes, and policies.

> What is crucial, however, is that the use of relationships as a lens through which to view school policies and practices can effect concrete changes in curriculum and instruction, school organization, co-curricular programs, community partnerships, and support services that makes the entire school environment more conducive to engagement and achievement, and to great teaching and learning. (Scales & Taccogna, 2001, p. 34)

The Factors Influencing Decision Making

Peters (2002) found a propensity on the part of teachers and principals to formulate an immediate judgment with regard to the processes of decision making. Forty-seven percent of the participants' responses were identified as either likes or dislikes of the decision-making processes, which indicated teachers and principals were frequently emotional rather than methodical decision makers.

The symbolic frame received the fewest coded responses in both the principal and teacher groups. The frame revealed events in the participants' schools and their meanings were loosely connected; the same events had very different meanings to participants because of differences in the interpretation of the experience. The symbolic frame, which explores the organization as a culture and the development of shared meaning, was the least active frame among participants.

Principals perceived referent power to be their primary means of influence. Teacher responses indicated otherwise, as they believed strategy to be the principals' primary means of influence upon decision making.

The Emerging Ethical and Legal Frames in Education

Peters (2002) identified ethical and legal frames in addition to Bolman and Deal's (1997) four-frame model. As teachers and principals interact with students, they are confronted daily with situations requiring them to make decisions, which have educational and legal

consequences. Seemingly, educational law and related legal issues play an increasingly significant role in defining the context of educational problems and decision-making processes. Legal concerns permeated topics such as teacher tenure, student threats, supervisory responsibilities, transportation of students, special education, student rights, student property, fiscal responsibility, personal conduct, school safety, and evaluations. Teachers indicated they are increasingly influenced by case law and legislation on educational practice.

Teachers and principals felt that the modeling of ethical behavior should be a key component of a school's effort to guide students. They believed their colleagues live ethical lives, marked by principled decisions, not by self-interest or expediency. They noted that any decision affecting people has ethical implications; therefore, decision-making requires a certain sensitivity and commitment to ethics. No standard definition was given by which participants clearly defined ethical decision making. They felt each situation was unique, requiring them to do what was best for the students within the specific contexts. For example, rules were considered ethical, but, in the opinion of the participants, the application of rules should not be blindly applied to all. The prevailing thought, as shared by participants, was, “What’s best for the students involved in this situation?” Both the ethical and legal frames reveal the relevancy and preoccupation these concepts had in the decision-making process.

Implications for Teacher Training

The manner in which teachers are trained should be changed to accommodate the time-consuming but essential nature of reflective decision making. The need here is to redefine the knowledge base of the field and to insure that teachers have the capacity, both intellectually and practically, to develop reframing strategies. While the constraints of time frequently prohibit or

hinder such initiatives, it is only when this purposeful and deliberate practice is nurtured that reframing becomes a reality, spawning new and creative decision-making alternatives.

Peters (2002) observed that even when principals and teachers employed multiple frames, conspicuously absent were the deep, contemplative, and reflective processes that give birth to creative insights. Designing opportunities for teachers to learn about framing must be a process that links three essential elements: (a) knowledge of reframing principles and effective strategies, (b) the necessary time to nurture a reflective decision-making practice, and (c) an organizational structure that empowers teachers to be quality decision makers. Integrating these elements may present significant challenges for a school, but if this priority of process is implemented in pre-service and in-service .

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