Taming Turbulence: An Examination of School Leadership Practice During Unstable Times

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Abstract

Within the realm of K–12 education, instability is an inherent feature that school leaders must successfully manage. Turbulence, in the form of micro-level issues (day-to-day, in-house happenings) and macro-level concerns (externally imposed organizational disturbances/changes), develops indiscriminately and may escalate quickly without adequate warning. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the means by which a school leader can moderate the school atmosphere. This paper reveals the decisions, devices, and behaviors of one school principal who worked to minimize the effects of turbulent conditions in the senior high school setting. The findings illuminate particular leadership tools and actions that may be of assistance to school leaders who seek to better stabilize their schools.

Introduction

Turbulence is an inherent feature of the public school and is something that school leaders must successfully manage. As Gross (1998) explained, there are many sources of turbulence that may arise, including a disjointed community, isolation, issue overload, tension-filled conditions, loss of support, communication problems, rapid changes, value-conflicts, and external pressures.

According to Gross's (2006) *turbulence theory*, the concept of *positionality* is important, since where a person stands in relation to the turbulence will determine how he or she experiences it. This is because turbulence "is not usually spread around the school and community in a uniform way" (Gross, 2006, p. 56), and the school principal's position lends to a preoccupation with many of the conflicts that develop within the organization. Unfortunately, such conflicts may cluster at any given time, and these combined forces or events may become formidable, as they create a *cascading* effect that escalates the level of turbulence that the school faces (Gross, 2006; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). For the school leader, the cascading effect is something that is often very real and may require a high capacity for management, decision-making, and action. Furthermore, the school leader must consider when to deliberately heighten the level of turbulence within the organization, for the purpose of gaining positive results in pursuing particular goals (Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Along with the school principal's role and expertise in handling turbulence, the school's stability will determine whether it can withstand heightened levels of turbulence. The school's stability level depends on past and present circumstances, members' confidence in the inherent worthiness of the organization, and the school's ability to be flexible while turning turbulent experiences into opportunities (Gross & Shapiro, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the workings of a school principal who sought to manage turbulence within the senior high school environment. The study explores the lived experiences of the

leader, subordinates, and stakeholders who were involved with the school organization. The focus is on gaining an understanding of the school principal's intentions, and then examining his actual leadership decisions and behaviors, as experienced by school stakeholders.

Specifically, this study seeks to reveal whether the school principal was able to successfully lead the school organization during times of heightened turbulence, and to determine what allowed or disallowed him to do so. The perceptions of administrators, teachers, staff, parents, community members, and recent graduates were utilized to gather an understanding of the principal's leadership behavior. This process was set to generate an understanding of how leader competencies and organizational behavior relate to the management of turbulence within the school environment.

A Primer on Turbulence within the School Organization

Putnam (1991) revealed that, "within any environment, there are areas of calm, agitation, opportunity, and danger – as well as areas of unknown risks. Because of these coexisting but conflicting elements, all environments are turbulent" (pp. 1–2). As an aggregate of uninhibited forces arise, the degree of instability increases (Putnam, 1991). However, with the right decisions, skills, and actions, a school can appropriately harness turbulence within the organizational environment (Gross, 2006; Putnam, 1991; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Intertwined with turbulence is the concept of change, which is fundamental to school leadership in the 21st century. According to Fullan (2009), school principals have the difficult task of managing two different worlds:

> The old world is still around, with expectations that the principal will run a smooth school and to be responsive to all; simultaneously, the new world rains down on schools with disconnected demands, expecting that at the end of the day the school constantly should be showing better test results and ideally becoming a learning organization. (p. 57)

With this "double world" comes the paradox effect, which, as Jaffee (2001) discusses, "stems from the multiple consequences of a single action which seem to contradict or work at cross-purposes with another" (p. 34). Even with the best of intentions, the actions of a school principal within such a world create a natural tension, as both positive and negative organizational effects occur (Jaffee, 2001).

More than two decades ago, Morgan (1988) accurately predicted the 21st century management world, which consists of tension, ambiguity, and paradox, and proposed that managers must cope with chaotic, ambiguous situations through creative actions and solutions. Morgan also explained the necessity for managers to understand that complexity is innate to the leadership game:

> Many managers may want simplicity, but the reality is that they have to deal with complexity. The complexity of organizational life is increasing rather than decreasing, as manifested in the conflicting demands posed by multiple stakeholders, the need for managers to deal with many things at once, and the almost continuous state of transition in which organizations exist. (p. 12)

Quite possibly, the school organization stands as the most appropriate venue for Morgan's thinking. This is due to the multiplicity of issues and concerns that need to be addressed within the educational domain (Beck, 1994; Blankstein, 2004; Gross, 1998; Sernak, 1998; Shapiro & Gross, 2013).

Fullan (2009) outlines various forces of turbulence, fragmentation, and change that mark today's typical educational institution, including a lack of coherence in mission; disconnections within the school curriculum; incomplete and/or insufficient teaching modalities; student alienation and strained relationships; an anti-intellectual peer culture; and a lack of student support and attention due to large, overcrowded schools (p. 42).

While high levels of turbulence are very real within today's K–12 school system, Sergiovanni (2005) argues that, with the right mix of values, systems, structures, and actions, school leaders hold the capacity to successfully defend against the obstacles they face as they work to improve their respective schools. From this perspective, various authors have offered their views on how to best manage the forces of turbulence, change, and paradox within school organizations (Fullan, 2010; Kochanek, 2005; MacGilchrist, Myers, & Reed, 2004; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010; Schlechty, 2005). In fact, various conceptual ingredients have been offered for managing, leading, and improving school organizations in turbulent times. Included in the mix are such terms as *networked organizations, distributed leadership, professional learning communities, ethical decision-making practices, operational intelligence, collective capacities, teacher leadership,* and *systemic vision* (Fullan, 2009; Gabriel, 2005; Kochanek, 2005; Lambert, 2003; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; MacGilchrist, Myers, & Reed, 2004; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010; Strike, 2007). While some of these focus on the decisions and actions of the school leader, others center on more global organizational behavior.

In light of the modalities school leaders currently have available to them during turbulent times, there is an urgent call to microscopically study the actualities of school leadership practice in today's schools. This is due to the sociopolitical conditions that have made turbulence and change very real to the educational arena in the 21st century. To better understand the attributes, proficiencies, and limitations of school leadership practice, it is necessary to analyze the activity that plays out in K–12 public school settings. By doing so, scholars and practitioners can better understand what is being done to combat the turbulent forces currently disrupting the educational process. In turn, school leaders, scholars, and practitioners can learn lessons in educational leadership through real-world scenarios.

Methodology

This study focuses on the phenomenon of school leadership during turbulent times, as experienced by school stakeholders. For this purpose, qualitative case study methodology was employed. The intent was to collect rich, meaningful descriptions of leadership behavior and to determine how such behavior impacted the school environment. To meet this end, the perceptions of various stakeholder groups were gathered, including those of school administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and recent graduates. This effort resulted in a clear description of the turbulent forces and associated decisions and actions of the school principal, which illuminated particular leadership tendencies during times of instability.

Sample

This study employed single site case study methodology to allow for in-depth analysis of the problem area. The site selection process involved critical assessment procedures that ensured a suitable location in terms of the voluntary involvement of the school principal and each school stakeholder group. The chosen site was a southeastern Pennsylvania senior high school that consisted of

approximately 2,000 students. The site was semirural, with multiple areas of land preservation, storefronts, and neighborhood developments (City-Data, 2012; ePodunk, 2007).

Data Collection

Data collection procedures for this study occurred over a 5-month period. Data collection began with an in-depth initial interview with the school principal to acquire a description of his leadership intentions. From there, the leader's actual behaviors were examined through researcher observation, document analysis, a series of follow-up interviews that investigated specific decisions and behaviors, and an exit interview. Additionally, school stakeholder perceptions of the principal and the school organization were gathered through a semistructured interview format. For this purpose, a total of 30 administrators, faculty members, parents, community members, and recent high school graduates were selected for participation. The researcher utilized interview protocols to focus on gathering rich descriptions about the school leader's tendencies and behaviors and asked each respondent to provide details and clarification about past happenings and current events.

Triangulation of data occurred through onsite researcher observations and document analysis efforts centered on gathering an understanding of the school principal's communicative and behavioral tendencies during episodes of instability. A discovery-oriented approach remained constant throughout the data collection process as the researcher conducted participant interviews, onsite observations, and document analyses.

Data Analysis

Throughout the 5-month data collection phase of the study, the initial stage of data analysis occurred as the researcher, transcribed interviews, listened to the audio versions of each interview, wrote notes that revealed apparent connections, read and reflected upon the field notes, analyzed thoughts and observations, engaged in preliminary thematic construction, and compared the data and apparent themes to related research literature.

At the conclusion of the 20-week onsite investigation, and after verifying the interview data with each participant, the researcher advanced the process by developing categories and themes. Both aspects of the cross-case analysis approach were employed: 1) grouping different people's answers to common questions, and 2) analyzing different perspectives on key issues (Patton, 1990). Additionally, Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) method was utilized through the following steps: 1) reading through the raw text and extracting the relevant passages of each interview, 2) grouping repeating ideas and organizing preliminary themes, 3) revamping and finalizing the thematic construction process, by making sure each relevant data element could be properly filtered into a theme, and 4) creating a theoretical narrative by retelling the participants' stories.

Methods of Verification

Several measures were implemented that supported and bolstered the internal validity of the study. These included: 1) the solicitation of feedback, 2) triangulation, 3) the collection of rich data, 4) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, 5) member checks, 6) the maintenance of a case study database, 7) a search for discrepant evidence and negative cases, and 8) comparison. Each of these strategies has been mentioned as a specific tactic to allow the qualitative researcher to increase the credibility of conclusions (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003).

The extended timeframe reserved for data collection strengthened the verification process, by allowing for considerations of what might be pertinent to the study and offering a variety of activities and events to explore. Additionally, this period allowed for a proper review of participant responses and a clarification process that involved the study's interviewees. Also, considerable dialogue with the school principal took place, which led to a deep exploration of organizational expressions, activities, procedures, and events.

Results

This study's findings suggest the school principal under investigation was, in many ways, able to manage and lead successfully during times of heightened organizational instability. Furthermore, due to the magnitude and systemic nature of the school principal's behavior, the results of this study offer a particular framework of school leadership during turbulent times. In the following sections, the school principal's leadership intentions and actions will be revealed and tied to pertinent literary findings that relate to effective leadership behavior.

Discussion of Findings

With more than a decade of school leadership experience, this study's school principal possessed a historical record of successfully handling difficult situations. Severe turbulence, in the form of a deadly meningitis case, a teacher's strike, a bomb threat, and a small bomb explosion in the school served as a record of disturbing activity that he had to manage. Admittedly, the school principal's ability to handle more current episodes of turbulence stemmed from his prior experiences, which he was able to overcome not only due to his personal aptitudes but also because of the aptitudes of those around him at the time. Within this context, the findings reveal specific features of the school principal's crisis management abilities. In particular, the findings exposed three distinct strategies and a number of aptitudes, concepts and principles that allowed him to establish a reputation for being able to handle turbulent conditions appropriately. Figure 1 presents each of the intentions, behaviors, concepts, and principles that were associated with this study's school leader.

In relating emotion to the school principal's behavior in times of organizational turbulence, it may be most fitting to begin with the reframing process that occurred, as he was confronted with unstable circumstances. In his own words, the school principal framed turbulence as "an opportunity to gain credibility and to gain leadership potential." Furthermore, he believed:

> …if you don't take risks, if you don't create turbulence, you aren't doing anything, you aren't moving forward…So, I feel comfortable that if there isn't some angst, then we wouldn't be getting at the core in making things better for kids, and if we aren't taking risks, we'll never get better…And, I'm able to coach people through that, also. So, that makes me feel somewhat comfortable.

The school principal's line of thinking was aligned closely with Morgan's (1988) and Gross' (1998, 2006) assertions that flux is not only inherent to organizational life, but also provides an opportunity for the leader to propel the organization forward. Since the school principal positively framed turbulent school happenings, considered what could be gleaned from specific situations, and aptly intervened when necessary, he was able to systematically stabilize the school. Gross and Shapiro (2013) discussed such
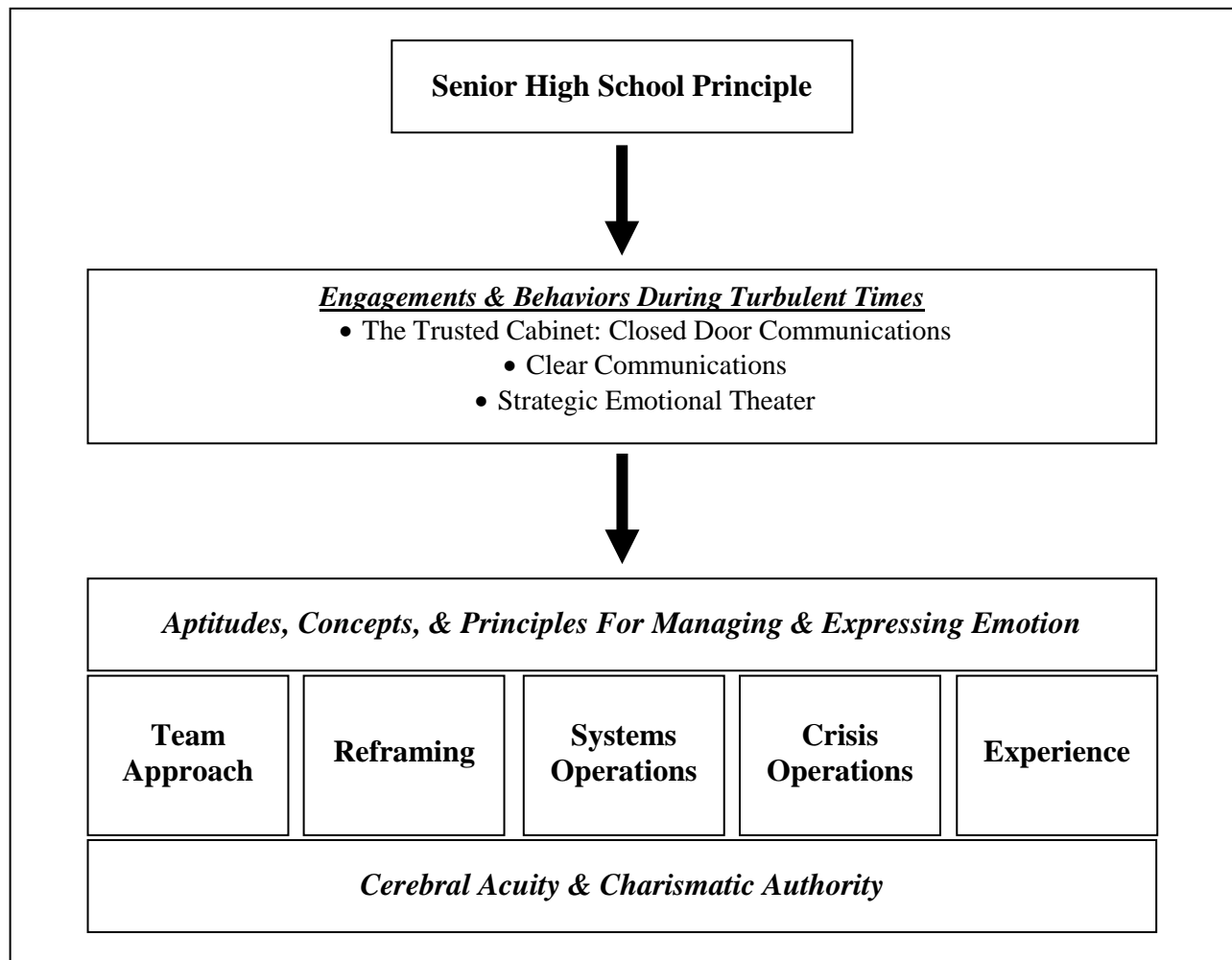
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Figure 1. A Framework for School Leadership During Turbulent Times

activities and explained that when organizations operate from the standpoint of "learning systems," they can turn a "turbulent experience into an opportunity to reflect and actually profit, thereby further enhancing their resilience and stability" (p. 48). The installment of an appraisal process, which is natural to the formation of emotion (Damasio, 2003), was highly significant for the school principal. The mere understanding that turbulence was essential to his leadership prepared him to respond appropriately and confidently. As he stated,

> Every time that there is something negative going on, there is an opportunity to gain more traction and more leverage by showing that you work through it, and perhaps reversing an original decision. So, from my perspective, as far as my ability to lead, it's all going to be a win.

The rational and emotional judgments he made about various circumstances, such as opening a new school building, dealing with a teacher strike, controlling a deadly meningitis case, changing the honors class system, recovering from a small bomb explosion, handling bomb threats, changing the

school mascot, and providing corrective feedback to teachers allowed him to set the stage for response. For the school principal, these were not problems, but rather, opportunities to establish or re-establish a leadership standard within the school. Lazarus (1991) framed this pattern of thinking as a *cognitive-coping mechanism,* and this stream of consciousness kept the school leader's stress levels in-check, which allowed him to respond with maximum cognitive capacity. Additionally, in this realm, the principal brought forth the tenets of affect control theory since he felt comfort with his ability to handle difficulties and was acting in a way that reflected his own identity as school leader at a time of instability (Heise, 1988; Kemper, 2000). Furthermore, in framing situations in this manner, the premise behind social cognitive theory was at work, as the school principal became an agent for proactive engagement, self-reflection, self-regulation, and self-organization—and in this way, began to intentionally make things happen through his actions (Bandura, 2001; Cassady & Boseck, 2008). As he explained,

> I think I can see the big picture and see how things will play out down the road. I'm close to right on with those kinds of things. I get what makes people tick. I get the politics…I get where my position is, where my boundaries are, and I know where I am pressing them, and choose carefully when to do so. I think I understand that positive energy makes positive things happen. Negative energy is just wasted energy. So, what's the point? That's why I do those things behind closed doors.

As explained by the school principal, the reframing process was bolstered through strategic emotional management activities that allowed him to direct and express emotion in ways that did not interfere with or harm the level of functioning within the school. Here, he entered Epstein's (1998) realm of *constructive thinking* as he was able to focus on the job at hand, carry out plans, and appropriately deal with negative feelings. The fact that he had a responsible, trustworthy administrative team was critical in his ability to communicate emotion while discussing issues poignantly and developing plans of action. As he discussed, "I'm just confident in myself in those situations. I'm confident in myself because of the people who are around me. I know I can't do it myself…I rely upon my administrative team incredibly." The closed-door forum served as a venue for venting and discussion, which enacted a team approach and made use of available talents. In this setting, his intrapersonal and interpersonal skill sets gained relevance, as he utilized his emotional and social competence abilities. The school's faculty understood these skills, as one teacher explained:

> Each one of them [assistant principals] has been a real good helper for [him] and have brought different strengths to the table and they've learned from each other, so it's been interesting to watch them, to watch him to share the power with them…and not think that he knows everything.

Another teacher commented on the school principal's abilities in moments of crisis:

> He's able to leverage his assistant principals in a variety of different ways that are effective at dealing with all kinds of issues. But, his initial reaction is usually one of thinking quickly and engaging the right people to deal with the issue. He's not reactionary… He's usually pretty quick to think about what the issue is, what has risen, how serious it is and who can best respond to those

issues… So, he's very good at recognizing who he has available to him that could respond well to things and engaging them in the process.

One of the assistant principals explained the process of team leadership that the school principal invoked:

> There are a lot of really smart people on our administrative team that all have special strengths and what [the principal] does, instead of taking ownership, for one thing he delegates and taps the strengths of each of his administrators. I think that [he] is able to delegate and look at what he has and tap those resources, empower those people, make those people powerful and ultimately that funnels right back to him. And, it's really a great way to lead and it makes people feel a part of the team. That's ultimately what this is, it's a big team and he's the head of the team, he's the captain of the team, and I think he is able to disburse power or disburse power ultimately to get us to where we need to be.

As Weare (2004) revealed, human beings possess the ability to organize, modulate, moderate, shape, and think about their feelings through reflection and learning. The findings suggest that the school principal was masterful in both organizing and moderating his emotions in a way that allowed him to communicate clearly when necessary and also engage in a type of emotional theater that allowed him to put forth an unflappable social demeanor. When communicating during times of crisis, he was able to contain his emotions while offering distinct messages through assertive speech and mannerisms. In this way, he displayed a commanding demeanor that provided clear direction for the school's stakeholders. One former student commented on his high school principal's ability:

> He definitely gives you a sense of confidence that he knows what he's doing. He's very composed… I think he's just very good at answering questions and being in the spotlight, taking the heat. He doesn't seem nervous. He doesn't really allow for the opportunity for someone to come in and shake him up and get him off balance and then throw more attacks or more questions at him. He's very focused.

One of the assistant principals described the principal's leadership style under turbulent conditions:

> Its steady, its calm…when there's a crisis situation that comes up or a situation that needs to be brainstormed and all those resources are brought to bear, lets come together, lets clear our minds and understand what's our responsibility and what's not our responsibility…he is able to narrow the focus very quickly on that. [He] is very strategic when he uses anger and emotion in a situation, and he will. I can't remember when I've seen him actually use it when I would say he is out of control in a situation, or losing his ability to see the big picture on something. [He] will only use emotion or use anger for effect.

A teacher commented on the "professional presence" the principal exuded during difficult times:

I just think that he's the ultimate professional…even in spite of something terrible that might have happened, that might be upsetting to him, he doesn't let that come through. I mean, he may let that come through in a private setting but the face that he shows to the staff is one that says I'm calm about this. I'm in control and everything will be fine. I'm going to take care of it.

One teacher discussed the principal's ability to listen, and then communicate his decisions in a very clear, straightforward manner:

He does value our opinion, our perspective as classroom teachers. And then, he makes a decision. He doesn't waffle much. When people go to him, it's a no-win position [for him]. No matter what decision he makes, there's always going to be some stakeholder that's upset… But, he's firm and he'll make a decision and he collects all the information, listens to everyone's point of view, makes a well- reasoned decision and then lives with it and feels comfortable with it and doesn't kind of waiver back and forth and try to kowtow to people that are being negative.

The conduct of the school principal coincides with Topping, Bremner, and Holmes's (2000) idea that "socially competent people are able to select and control which behaviors to emit and which to suppress in any given context, to achieve any given objective set by themselves or prescribed by others" (p. 33). Overall, in a multitude of ways, the school principal demonstrated a certain acuity in his emotional and social engagements under the lens of organizational volatility. Thus, his behavior reflected many of the tenets of the social and emotional intelligences offered in recent literature, including stress tolerance, reflective self-regulation, flexibility, problem-solving, mood management, self-awareness, concern, conflict management, social cognition, and interpersonal expertise (Albrecht, 2006; Bar-On, 2007; Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Ciarrochi & Godsell, 2005; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, 2006; Higgs & Dulewicz, 1999; Hughes, Patterson, & Terrell, 2005; Kang, Day, & Meara, 2005; Ortony, Revelle, & Zinbarg, 2007; Weisinger, 1998; Zirkel, 2000).

The school principal's acuity went beyond the social and emotional realms, as his planning, knowledge, and decision-making abilities surfaced both before and during turbulent events. Such aptitudes emerged in the form of the systems processes and crisis principles that he worked to install, which allowed him to advance his influence during unstable times. One administrator commented on the established organizational norms, which stemmed from the principles and systems in place:

What [the principal] does very well in meetings is that he establishes norms of belief. Here's what we believe in the organization, and here's what we do not believe, and how do we act off of that, even though there might be multiple ways of approaching it. So, it's modeling and reinforcing… So, if we wouldn't continue to hear those types of things and bounce those ideas around, then we would go back to a vacuum of decision-making…that's where I think those kinds of meetings and discussions are so important.

Another administrator explained how proactive engagement reduced the level of turbulence and tension felt in the school:

I continue to appreciate how he uses his calendar as an organizational method, in terms of setting meetings ahead, setting agendas for those meetings, allowing open agendas for administrators to contribute to this calendar, and then with weekly meetings and in daily meetings there is both the understanding and culture of this. And, there is just not reacting to the issue of the moment, but we are going to think well enough ahead, we are going to discuss what we are reading and we're going to be able to map out where we want to go with elements. He's smart, he anticipates, he self admits that's through experience, having done this for nine years, but it's also just anticipating what the next issue might be and creating and setting up people to be successful no matter what's coming around the corner.

One administrator discussed how the principal's "cerebral acuity" and "charismatic authority" flashed during tension-filled meetings:

Anytime he conducts a meeting he is always prepared and engaging, always. We've dealt with a lot of legal issues in this office with hot topic items. Suspensions, expulsions. He has been in several situations that are so heated with attorneys, big time attorneys, and he is able to take those people and turn them upside down. And, he does it with a smile on his face because he's prepared and he is well thought out and as smart as all those attorneys are, he comes ready for a fight without ever lifting his hands. And, when he speaks, it's of knowledge, of fact, consistently. He knows the handbook. He knows school law and he's been in a number of those situations where people are coming in screaming and yelling at him. He never raises his voice. He states his position, states where it's going and is able to get them to leave understanding where he's coming from. He is sympathetic but not apologetic. But, it's amazing how those hot meetings just get diffused like that. He never gets upset about them. He just listens and when you have a leader that that's the way he handles it, you're just sitting right behind him and giddy-up.

In relating this school scenario to *systems thinking*, Gharajedaghi's (1999) five essential dimensions of a system become apparent: 1) the generation and distribution of services, 2) the generation and dissemination of information, knowledge, and understanding, 3) the creation and dissemination of beauty, or the emotional aspect of being, including the meaningfulness and excitement of what is done in and of itself, 4) the formation and institutionalization of values for the purpose of regulating and maintaining interpersonal relationships through cooperation, coalition, competition, and conflict, and 5) the development and duplication of power, which involves legitimacy, authority, and responsibility (p. 56). The findings suggest that the school principal allocated a significant amount of time in holding administrative team meetings focused on these five dimensions, wherein each team member became accustomed to the values and language that eventually became inherent to the school's culture. As the team grew closer, due to shared organizational understandings, team members were left to handle lower level turbulent issues on their own. Furthermore, the team worked to communicate performance or production concerns to faculty; share information and understandings with others in the organization; generate positive emotion by recognizing people and celebrating organizational achievements; and institutionalize the established, communicated values of the organization. It was this team-centered approach that led to common causes and understandings, which allowed effective action to take place during instances of organizational turbulence. In short, high production,

transparency, emotional stimulation, shared values, and duplications of power marked the school, due to the principal's willingness to work diligently in installing systems operations in all phases of the administrative team's work. The expansion of this effort could be seen in the principal's willingness to gradually grant control to other members of the workforce once he believed a satisfactory understanding of how he wanted the school to operate had taken hold. One administrator explained how the transformation in leadership and school culture took place under the principal's direction:

> [His leadership] has changed from stability to direction…And I think that's where and why we have seen such phenomenal growth across the board. He's allowed people to see and share in the vision, to [get the staff] into thinking that our ideas are their ideas and they buy into those ideas. They support us in those things…The only way you do that is by relinquishing control, which I have seen him do on a regular basis, sharing the vision and the leadership and then supporting from all angles.

Another administrator discussed the organizational norms established and explained how this allowed a proactive atmosphere to take hold:

> …any secondary or high school administrator is so often on their heels, in a reactive mode. To be proactive, you got to get out, you got to establish those norms, you got to have the language consistent from faculty meeting to cabinet meeting to staff development session, and then you got to echo that kind of language through formal and informal walk through observations, and otherwise. And then when individuals or teams of teachers are doing it well, then you hit it big with full-scale emails or faculty meeting celebrations of here is what we're doing and you come back to that same language. But, that's proactive, that's knowing your language, it's knowing where you want to go with an organization. And, [the principal] does that very, very well.

Finally, the school principal utilized particular crisis principles, when necessary, to handle turbulent conditions. These included being hands on, following school policy, focusing on the facts of the situation at hand, considering the school's values and the best interests of the students, providing clear direction, being transparent, and being tactful with those involved. One former student commented on his observations of the principal during a bomb explosion in the school:

> That afternoon, I saw him with the security officers, like they were in the television studio putting footage together trying to figure out ways to get everything together into one package, not like he was freaked out about this, like he didn't know how to handle it, but he seemed that in a situation like this when some kid makes something explode in the cafeteria in the school, he knows how to handle it and he doesn't lose control of what he knows has to happen. I could see that. Everything was very calm and collected. Everything was like, there's this step, this step, this step. "This is what I need done. This is what I need on this. We need to take care of it this way." And, he's just very in control and never displays weakness in those kinds of times.

A teacher revealed his take on why the principal has a track record of success in such situations:

I think what he does is, he plans what he's going to do and he gets a game plan by talking to the other principals. He's very methodical in the way he plans things. He always has a protocol…he's very proactive in figuring out what needs to be done. I think that reduces someone's anxiety. So, he's a planner…and he brings people in on the decision-making process.

Another teacher thought back to her original encounter with the principal as she explained his leadership capabilities:

He met with every one of the faculty members when he came in, for fifteen minutes, every single one of us. Talked to us, put a name to a face, got blown up, whatever. He took it all in stride and just said, "Okay, this is where I'm at. Here's what I need to do." And, he's never made a comment about it negatively. He's just said, "Thank you. I hope we can always talk this way. Moving forward, let's do this." That's big.

Overall, the school leader's principle-centered characteristics suggest a blend of cerebral acuity, systems operations, and a particular ethical awareness. As Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) discuss, the ethics of justice, critique, and care, when combined with the ethic of the profession, serve as complementary forces that assist the school leader's ability to make appropriate decisions. In this process, serving the "best interests of the student" becomes the "moral imperative" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 25). According to one assistant principal, these ethical underpinnings were a big part of the school principal's identity:

It's amazing to sit through a meeting with him…he's consistent, he's fair, he follows what he believes to be the right thing for the school and for students. And, he never takes shortcuts and doesn't bend in those situations. And, that's important, that consistency and that integrity keeps him where he is.

From the perspective of the principal, his application of ethical school leadership went one step beyond:

I think that probably the thing that I've done the most is, I never hang them [faculty and staff] out to dry. I always have their back. If someone were to make a mistake, I would take responsibility for it and people would really believe that it was me. I'm able to cover that. I would take the hit for that and they know that. I think they know I'll make the difficult call and I'll sit with them in the difficult meeting and that's happened over the years.

As the generated outcomes and stakeholder accounts suggest, the principal demonstrated a certain *moral acuity*, in which he was able to use key operational and ethical principles that aided the school during episodes of turbulence.

In linking this study's data to leadership theory, the school principal's behavior was closely aligned with various formulations of virtuous leadership conduct. Sergiovanni (1999) explains *authentic leadership* in terms of leaders who "anchor their practice in ideas, values, and commitments, exhibit distinctive qualities of style and substance, and can be trusted to be morally diligent in advancing the

enterprises they lead" (p. 17). Brown and Trevino (2006) discuss how transformational leaders apply ethical behavior in terms of 1) caring for others; 2) acting with integrity by aligning their behavior with moral principles; 3) considering the ethical consequences of their decisions; and 4) being ethical role models for others. Higgs and Dulewicz (1999) highlight the commonalities between transformational leadership and emotional intelligence, stressing that interpersonal sensitivity, self-awareness, influence, conscientiousness, intuitiveness, and motivation are inherent features of both emotional intelligence and successful leadership practice. Choi (2006) proposes that "charismatic leaders" are those who apply three components: 1) envisioning, which allows a picture of a desired future state to develop and causes excitement and organizational identification; 2) empathy, which allows the leader to understand others' motives, values, emotions and perspectives; and 3) empowerment, which is a process that leads to enhanced perceptions of self-efficacy among followers, as negative conditions are removed through both formal organizational practices and informal techniques. As evidenced by this study's stakeholder accounts and researcher observations, adept application of such leadership behavior holds the potential to bolster a school organization, when threatened by turbulent conditions.

Conclusion

Across the various leadership domains, including the emotional, social, cognitive, and moral, the school principal investigated for this study demonstrated a particular acuity for leadership practice, especially during times of heightened organizational instability. His aptitudes in such areas as communication, teamwork, emotional competence, strategy formulation, ethical reasoning, and rational decision-making not only allowed him to handle turbulence but also led to high levels of stakeholder trust for the school leader.

Taken together, the aptitudes and conduct of the school principal promote the idea that a particular *leadership acuity* that transverses the rational, emotional, social, technical, and moral domains is necessary to constrain turbulence while creating a resonant, trustful, and highly functioning organizational state. Therefore, the results of this study call for additional inquiry across the various realms of leadership conduct and promote the idea that school leadership preparation must invoke considerations from the ethical, emotional, social, spiritual, and technical perspectives. By gleaning knowledge and developing proficiencies across this spectrum, a rich tapestry can arise that illuminates the best practice of leadership while accounting for the upper potentials of human functioning and organizational conduct.

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