

## K-12 LEARNING THEORY: UNDERSTANDING CONDITIONS OF EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By

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### ABSTRACT

*In U.S. K-12 academia, Conditions of Empowerment and Conflict Resolution are interlinked. Covey's (1991, 2004a, 2004b) Conditions of Empowerment and Short's et al. (1993, 1994a, 1994b), 3 articles of Conflict Resolution connect these two examples. Covey (1991, 2004a, 2004b) suggests educational stakeholders start with the element of trust, while deriving from an honorable character. Drucker's philosophy mirrors this as well (Cohen, 2010). In order for a school district to assess empowerment for long-term goals, one must look at the strength of the faculty, not administration's in isolation. This would disregard personality traits or behavioral styles of employees. This study assessed Covey's (1991, 2004a, 2004b) Conditions of Empowerment; they include, 1. Character (i.e., Abundance Mentality), 2. Skills (i.e., communication, effective interaction, and listening with intent), 3. Win-Win Agreements, 4. Self-Supervision, and the five steps toward Accountability. Short's articles (1993, 1994a, 1994b) reveal that empowerment includes conflict resolution. Teacher-empowerment is a main criterion of managing faculty expectations and preventing unnecessary conflict in the K-12 school district. This is achieved by shared- responsibility and consistent positive communication. However, future research is needed to assess how teachers perceive empowerment from administrators.*

*Keywords: Conditions of Empowerment, Conflict Resolution, Stephen Covey, Phillip Schlechty, Paula Short, Teacher Empowerment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Slechty (2001) advises, "Those who lead cannot accomplish what they intend unless those whom they intend to lead feel empowered to act on their own" (p. 54). Often, within the academic K-12 setting, the vast and conflicting U.S. federal, state, and local mandates make it difficult to promote and maintain teacher empowerment. In the last decade, educational morale is low and trust is at an apparent deficit. This may be attributed to various factors: a fluctuating economy, stark decline of new teachers entering the career of education, program and curricular cuts, personnel lay-offs, and inability to fill teacher retirees' positions by attrition. Empowerment is a main criterion of managing faculty expectations and preventing unnecessary conflict in the district. Shared responsibility and positive communication are secondary criteria that

each stakeholder in the district must strive to utilize.

### 1. Character

One of the basic roles in character education is a commitment toward the other person. Often administrators promise much to faculty that simply cannot materialize. This may be due to time constraints that disconnect promises to the end-results. The follow-up is silence with neither an explanation nor apology. Consequently, faculty members feel angry, distrustful, and resentful.

When faculty and staff reach this level of distrust toward an administrator, often, it takes years of repair, if it occurs at all. Instead, it is better to correct the behavior before it gets misconstrued. Covey's (2004a, 2004b) example of Abundance Mentality is a way for a novice administrator to connect with faculty and staff while offering his or her support. It can be defined as a mentality that offers enough

resources to go around for everybody who are involved in a particular scenario. It may seem elementary in structure, but the effect is something of which few school districts partake.

Covey (2004a, 2004b) depicts further Abundance Mentality by showing its converse Scarcity Mentality. The latter is a mentality that enforces that something is defined as either black or white, good or bad, enough resources for all or “freezing” budget accounts. It is a philosophy from which we seem to be scripted from an early age. Often, we feel that if we don’t “win” at something, we have “lost” (all or nothing). He suggests to look at matters differently, while not looking at educational and life situations within the Scarcity Framework. Therefore, administrators should suggest that they would make available resources for faculty to accomplish their tasks (regardless of circumstances). And if they cannot provide immediate compensation, have a plan for additional aid or reimbursement. The object is to ensure that there are enough resources to accomplish successfully a new project.

A way to utilize resources without spending much is for faculty to maximize technology already provided for them; do not constantly look for other programs that may not apply to the school or to the budget. Schlechty (2001) defines technology as, “The means of doing the job, whatever the means and whatever the job may be” (p. 31). He feels that educational institutes are least likely to explore new technology, especially if it will affect daily business. Maybe in this economic climate, the answer is not to explore huge, new, vast programs, but rather to better implement and mandate the current software and programs better to the staff and faculty. For example, school districts have conflict when not all faculty members have the same technical requirements. In one district’s paradigm, half the teachers used grading software and the other half did not. Subsequently, a union issue followed since employees were hired in order to enter the grades manually of those who did not comply with using the software. A remedy for this example would be to re-open the contract language and specify a unified software change. Schlechty (2001) states, “Among the primary tasks of leaders are to identify the technologies that are essential

to the organization’s core business, and to endeavor to provide tools, processes, and skills needed to employ these technologies” (p. 35). Teachers need to have the background to develop an analysis of competing software/ hardware programs to best benefit the school district.

## 2. Skills

Interaction between faculty and administration works best when communication is authentic. Character can only derive when others see that one has an honorable intention. Consequently, Covey (2004a) suggests that one either instinctually trusts you, or not. Also he contends that,

“If you want to interact effectively with me, to influence me- your spouse, your child, your neighbor, your boss, your coworker, your friend- you first need to understand me. And you can’t do that with technique alone. If I sense you are using some technique, I sense duplicity, manipulation. And I don’t feel safe enough to open myself up to you” (p. 238).

Perception does not equal intentions. This aforementioned paradigm reaches into the educational field. There are so many young administrators who are terrific, but they do not connect with faculty, because they forget one very important rule: listen to understand someone, not just to hear. Based on an Aristotelian concept of “seek first to understand.” Covey (2004a, 2004b) addends this by stating that empathetic listening is not sympathy; it is not agreeing; it is reflecting and analyzing the words being spoken before a response.

## 3. Win-Win Agreements

Covey’s (1991) concept of “Win-Win Agreements” promotes positive outcomes for administration and teachers. It is defined as a, “Psychological / Social contract [with a] clear mutual understanding and commitment re-expectations” (p. 197). In his 2004a publication, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, this agreement allows self-evaluation using criteria that both parties create. It is much less awkward than the traditional evaluation as both sides are accountable for the criteria that they have created. Within the Win-Win Agreement, there are five areas in which Covey (1991) suggests one can perfect the outlook on the Win-Win Agreement: 1. Desired Results, 2. Guidelines, 3. Resources, 4. Accountability, and 5. Consequences.

Specifically, within Desired Results process, the organizational mission statement needs to include a personal aspect. It needs to have the aid of the faculty, staff, and community members whom it represents. If it does not, there is no ownership. It is suggested that the best part of the Win-Win agreement is to have faculty, staff, and community members contribute correspondingly to the mission statement. Also, to reach the desired results, there needs to be an accurate timeline of incremental stages. According to Covey (1991), administrators do not realize the importance of an accurate mission statement. Included in the successful mission statement are patience, long-term perspective, and meaningful involvement. When job instability is at a high, long-term projects do not receive much attention. Often, administrators stay in one district just to gain experience. Lack of time and resources prevent them from building a long-term mission statement for the district, when they know it may not apply to them in a few years. That Scarcity mentality is what is disrupting the positive communication between administration and teachers.

Within Guidelines, it is suggested that there are few procedures, stated levels of initiatives, and what should not occur in academia. At times, districts are so preoccupied with what they want, they assume that faculty and staff know what not to do. That can be a costly mistake because the perception of understanding differs between stakeholders. What one faculty member might do, another would not consider. For example, one district empowers teachers by allowing them to have a rotating chair position in each department. That way, they feel as if they are more connected to "big picture goals" (Bolch, 2009). In another district, however, due to contractual mandates, a rotating chair position would not be feasible.

Resources as mentioned earlier, should not rely on budgetary but rather human, structural, and systematic criteria. Human resources include team-building and individual progression. Bolch (2009) suggests that tenure should be viewed as a goal and not a default. Often, administrators only see tenure as the end result, not as an on-going process that will continue after the tenure has reached it and successfully passed its requirement. At

times, when administration and teachers see tenure as the end result they shut-down, or refuse to grow developmentally and intellectually, while knowing that their job is "secure". To prevent this, it is advised that a district hires a teacher who fits the needs of the mission statement, and sees the candidate as an extended fit for the district's long-term goals. Unfortunately, with short-term needs of the district long-term goals seem to be always out-of-reach.

Accountability within the Win-Win Agreement shows, "The standards of performance and when to give reports" (Covey, 1991, p. 197). The timing of when to give reports can be equally important. It is a topic that is not often discussed. Additionally, managers and administrators seem to focus on crises before opportunities. Therefore, they are "putting out fires" constantly, and will not accommodate the need for growth in the district. Administrators can combat this by preventing potential issues, not by ignoring them. One can prevent problems by setting realistic goals and managing priorities by level of importance.

Consequences need to be aligned to the task, inclusive of the scope of responsibility (Covey, 1991). Positive consequences include: a new assignment, flexible schedule, leave of absence, appreciation or advancement. Negative consequences are retraining, reprimand, or termination (Covey, 1991). Also, a form of negative consequence is a non-verbal/ no response: at times this is used when results are not being discussed openly. Uncertainty is not a positive attribute in any environment, since it only causes confusion and resentment.

The best Win-Win Agreement seen was in another district regarding their evaluation process. It was done in a manner of a couple traditional formal evaluations. However, twice a year, a form was given to teachers for self-evaluation and reflection. This included the list of professional development seminars attended and questions concerning personal philosophies in education inside and outside the classroom. This was able to occur before the implementation of recent Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR).

## 4. Self-Supervision/Accountability

Win-Win agreements are set to lead faculty and administration toward self-evaluation and accountability. Even though guidelines must be provided, it does not involve how faculty carries out the methodology of completing tasks. Covey (1991) contends that Win-Win, "is a human resource principle that recognizes that people are capable of self-direction and self-control and can govern themselves ... to achieve the desired results" (p. 194).

Moving toward accountability includes five steps where faculty completes tasks according to guidelines that administration has set. First, "Provide a clear understanding of desired results" (Covey, 1991, p. 240). That way the staff member can work either autonomously or within a group and the expectation are well-known. This is particularly useful in curriculum writing. Administration should be aligned to setting the State standards and then allow each department to fit their ideas into the checkpoints provided by the state. Next, administration needs to know the level of initiatives within their faculty members to have them effective work toward the goals of a project. There are always faculty who want to do it all, or need recommendations, or need a lot of prodding.

Administration should decide how the feedback process will occur. Questions to ask are: how frequently should the team report-back? Which individuals need more reminding/ check-ins than others? Who needs constant reminding, or little to none? Third, classify assumptions. This allows administration to see if faculty is going in the wrong direction from an early start. Fourth, provide as much time and resources as possible. There is nothing worse than having inadequate time to accomplish a task.

Dealing with any state educational policies can be time consuming, frustrating, and change very frequently. At one point in the author's educational career, she has been working with the English Department chair to finish a grant on which they thought they had enough time to accomplish. However, they received word that the deadline had been moved-up with a limited two days to complete it. The prior calm-setting suddenly turned to chaos while attempting to complete the necessary

paperwork. Additionally, it caused more stress on the district because these teachers had to be "pulled" from our classes to finish this request, and substitutes had to be hired.

Fifth, there needs to be a debriefing of the completed staff work; so often, much like in lesson planning, this is an imperative step that is missed. However, there needs to be an accurate presentation of the pieces that were accomplished. Most times, this is a good element found in professional development tasks that administration asks of teachers. However, teachers don't reciprocate this important idea to their students within the classroom.

## 5. Teacher Empowerment, School Climate, and Conflict Resolution

Short was the primary author of three educational articles in 1993 and 1994 discussing the themes of teacher empowerment, school climate, and conflict resolution. Short (1994), Short & Johnson (1994), and Short & Rhinehart (1993) contend that the main reasons that teachers are not empowered are found within three elements: Teachers are isolated; they are not involved in the decision-making process; and they have no control of issues that occur outside the classroom. Teachers should be centralized when improving education. This is overlooked often as administrators, parents, Board and community members, and even internal and external counsel (attorneys, e.g.) have more of an impact on a child's education.

However, in the last decade, teachers are very much isolated from colleagues due to a couple factors: conflicting union issues and strife, and the increasing inconsistent requirements for new teacher certification and professional development that tenured teachers do not have. In the former, there seems to be a huge schism in the mentality of tenured and probationary teachers. For example, the veteran- teachers, as it appears, never used much sick-time. They saved their time since it accrued annually. New teachers seem to take most of their fifteen sick days, while ignoring the policy that one may not take a sick day before or after a holiday without a doctor's note. This has caused tension as administrators attempt to remedy the situation with letters in their files. Although it is "legal" in union contractual terms, it makes for a difficult time finding substitutes the Friday before vacation.

Therefore, veteran teachers are called into cover the probationary absentee- teachers' classes; this strains the relationship between colleagues. A new teacher should have professional development time, but it should be in the summer fostered with a stipend.

The issue of finding substitutes falls upon colleagues when not enough external help is available. That can cause potential union issues. No matter how a student may feel toward a teacher, good or bad, they do not like constant-absentee teachers: it throws off lesson pacing, their expectations for the current and upcoming weeks, and constantly deciphering the new objectives of a substitute. It would be more productive to cut down the number of hours in seminars during a regular school day, and have them either when school is not in session or during planning periods/ free periods. Students base their trust on consistency. When we show inconsistency, it disturbs their expectations. It is ironic, that when the state wants to "empower teachers" with strategies within these seminars, they are actually being counterproductive taking teachers away from their classroom time. There can be no seminar for the positive benefits of experiencing the day-to-day structure of teaching. One cannot learn the complex personalities of students when one is not there. Finally, how can we enforce their attendance when teachers are absent habitually?

## 6. Understanding Conflict

Avoidance of conflict within the K-12 academic environment is almost impossible; however, maintenance of good communication between stakeholders and careful consideration before action are key. Working in both a unionized and non-unionized district, there has been major conflicts within each. In the first district, there was a huge rift between standards applying to all teachers during their probationary period before tenure. Politics, inconsistent evaluations, and personal affect played a heavy role for those who were promoted positively. Before APPR, teacher evaluations differed by the administrators conducting them. When probationary teachers compared their evaluations, the discrepancy in evaluation caused them to be alienated and segregated within their department, school, and disconnected from the students

and other administrators. Currently with APPR mandates, there is a much more uniform assessment of all teachers (UFT, 2007).

## 7. Limitations

Administrators must know the difference between interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Short's (1994a) article defines teacher empowerment as intergroups and intragroups, subsequently. The former denotes incompatibilities of personalities between people. Sometime forced team-teaching exemplifies this paradigm. Conflict occurs when each member within this group has their own agenda, goals, standards, or norms.

The latter, intragroup conflict, occurs when role expectations contradict experiences. This could be the roles of a veteran teacher and probationary teacher against administrative expectations. Districts depend on the expertise and experience of all teachers. Administration should balance experienced teachers' autonomy, as well as promoting their ideas in a way that connects to the district's goals. However, more research is needed to assess the teachers' perception of administration.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Short (1994a) recommends that, "The primary rewards (sic) in teaching result from the teacher's positive self-evaluations of performance" (p. 2). This would occur in instructional, counseling, and moral terms. A teacher's self-efficacy will not develop if he or she is not active in self-knowledge. Her 1993 article recommends additionally that freedom and competency in the subject area affects school outcomes. K-12 Empowerment is contingent upon the energy and positive communication within the district. How stakeholders respond to different needs and communication is based on a number of factors. Covey's Conditions of Empowerment and Short's et al. articles connect how teachers not only respond to the aforementioned paradigms, but also how they interpret such shared responsibilities and feelings of community within the teaching environment. Without faculty feeling empowered to lead students by example, structural alignment to the district's goals will be misconstrued.

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Dr. Gabrielle L. McBath earned her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Northcentral University, and has a research and publication background on the various topics of: Educational mandates, English & German language and literature, and volunteers' motivational theories in wartime. She received her Master's degrees from LeMoyne College (Syracuse, NY) in Educational Leadership and the State University of New York College at Cortland in Secondary English. Her undergraduate work was completed at St. John Fisher College in English and German. Currently, she is a Manuscript Reviewer for the *Journal of International Education Studies*, Canada.

