GOAL-FREE PLANNING: A LARGELY UNRECOGNIZED, BUT FREQUENTLY USED, APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relatively unknown educational planning model introduced by David Clark in 1981 – goal-free planning. Unlike more traditional rational planning models, goal-free planning focuses on building a shared understanding of the school's mission, vision, and key values, rather than on more finite goals and objectives. It then calls for stakeholders to recognize how each can make his or her unique contribution to moving the school in the desired direction.

INTRODUCTION

Planning is an essential part of organizational improvement at all levels of formal education, from pre-school through higher education. As early as 1916, Fayol recognized it as a key management function, and it remains so today. In public preK-12 education, it is almost universally mandated by state policy; in higher education, virtually all accreditation agencies require it. However, although in some instances the *strategic planning* approach is prescribed, in most cases the specific planning model is not delineated in policy.

In 1981, David Clark added *goal-free* planning to the literature base repertoire. His contention was that both theory and experience mitigated against the efficacy of the traditional rational, goal-based models. Perhaps because very few authorities have given other than occasional references to this approach (e.g., Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1994; Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1994) other than to cite or briefly discuss Clark's work, goal-free planning is not among the approaches familiar to educational leaders. Also, because it is an easy, yet erroneous, assumption that the model is not based upon organizational goals or directions, educational leaders may prematurely dismiss it as non-relevant to their organizational improvement process and needs. However, in reality, the model is merely based on a broader definition of goals, less explicit, less procedural, more idiopathic, less concrete, and more emergent than most goals associated with rational planning processes (Clark, 1981, p. 44). Reflective analysis of how organizational improvement is generally approached and effected suggests that, at least unconsciously, educational leaders often follow the basic tenets of goal-free planning, moreso than those of the so-termed rational models.

BASIC TENETS OF RATIONAL PLANNING MODELS

Rational planning models are built on a fairly fixed, and essential, set of assumptions (Clark, 1981; Etzioni, 1967; Lindblom, 1959; March & Simon, 1959; Simon, 1957, 1997):

1. Clear understanding of an organization's goals or mission is an a priori condition for planning.
2. Planning must follow a sequential, rational process that allows the planner to build upon previous steps to address the organization's goals.

3. There is ample and effective communication across and among hierarchical levels of the organization
4. Planners and implementers have valid, reliable, and comprehensive access to information.
5. Events, their causes, and their consequences are predictable.
6. It is feasible to evaluate A clear the effects of the plan and its implementation, and to use the results for feedback and medication purposes.
7. It is possible to identify suitable alternative means of attaining goals and to rationally prioritize and choose among them.

Rational planning typically takes one of several well-established forms: comprehensive rational planning (Simon, 1957, 1997); bounded rationalism (March & Simon, 1959; Simon, 1957, 1997); incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959); or mixed-scanning (Etzioni, 1967). The very commonly used strategic planning model (Bryson, 1988, 2004; Cook, 1990; Kaufman & Herman, 1991; Mintzberg, 1994) is a sub-set of the comprehensive or bounded rational approaches, depending on the specific decision-making parameters set for that specific application. However, Clark (1981) contended that in most educational organizations, these seven basic assumptions seldom can be met, so an alternative, less-constricted planning approach must be employed; to this end, he proposed the goal-free approach.

BASIC TENETS OF GOAL-FREE PLANNING

Clark's (1981) model is predicated on stakeholders understanding, and agreeing upon, the organization's mission, vision, and key values rather than on more finite goals and objectives. In short, stakeholders must be in concert with the paradigm through which the organization views its world (Kuhn, 1970). Kuhn presented the concept of paradigm shifts, or individuals' and organizations' abilities to form radically different visions than those currently prevailing, visions that would allow important improvements that do not currently seem possible. For example, current technology permits distance education to allow asynchronous learning, bring advanced courses to remote locations where it was previously not feasible to employ qualified teachers, and relieves students from extensive commutes, often in inclement weather or dangerous driving conditions. This represents a significant paradigm shift in education.

Fortunately, formulating a future-oriented shared vision in most school situations does not require such a paradigm shift. The mission, vision, and values can be reflected upon and discussed in relation to current and predicted future conditions, with the purpose of discerning some key areas for future direction or thrust. Rather than adopting finite, rational goals, e.g., improving reading scores by *x*% over the next *y* years, broader directions, such as promoting reading across the curriculum, providing students with formative evaluation feedback to improve their reading, and assisting students to acquire skills and positive dispositions toward reading, are derived. Then, rather than prescribing how this should be implemented, the goal-free approach calls for leaders to work with the organizational stakeholders to help them to identify what contributions each could make to move the organization in the desired direction. This could well vary greatly among stakeholders; for example, the contributions an English teacher might propose in moving toward this direction would likely be considerably different from those of a music

teacher; yet, each could make his or her unique contribution. The school leader's responsibility would be to provide the necessary professional development, resources, encouragement, supervision, and evaluation to assist each stakeholder to make his or her contribution.

WHY EDUCATIONAL LEADERS MIGHT NATURALLY GRAVITATE TOWARD GOAL-FREE PLANNING

Educational leaders may gravitate toward the goal-free planning model because of their perceptions of the inadequacy of the traditional rational models. On the other hand, they may do so because of their affinity for some of the tenets of the goal-free model.

Negative Reasons Why Educational Leaders May Gravitate toward Goal-Free Planning

Most educational leaders, and the stakeholders of the organizations they serve, have had experience with rational planning; all too often, this has not been a positive, successful experience (Galvez, Cruz, & Diaz, 2015). Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, and Duque (2016) noted that although formal (rational) planning is required in most school improvement efforts, little is known about the quality of those plans or of plan implementation. Similarly, Mintzberg (1994) noted the low levels of effectiveness of strategic planning efforts. Educational leaders often express concern with the high time and resource intensity of rational planning methods; incremental planning does not suffer from these same concerns, but is ineffective in guiding large-scale or time-sensitive change. Mixed scanning attempts to mitigate the limitations of both models, yet the underlying assumptions and problems persist.

In large measure, it is the difficulty educational organizations face in meeting the rational planning assumptions that causes educational leaders to eschew these approaches. One assumption is that schools are tightly-coupled systems, culturally-driven and controlled, with rigidly shared values, and with extremely regular and effective communication and feedback; thus, "nothing gets very far out of line" (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 320) (see also Weick, 1976). Although some of these properties may exist in certain sub-systems of schools (e.g., financial, legal, and human resources), they are not typical of most site-based aspects, which more closely resemble loosely-coupled systems, which are flexible, provide maximum autonomy for individuals, and have strong social networks.

Another often unmet assumption of rational planning is that finite goals may readily be identified and agreed upon. Because the outcomes of the various alternatives deliberated cannot be accurately forecast in schools, it is often difficult even to set finite goals. Consequently, obtaining agreement on specific goals is also often not possible in schools. Educational organizations are not monolithic; they are comprised of competing or different sub-systems and value systems. As Evans (2001) explained, individuals within the organization are deeply concerned about how the proposed changes will positively or negatively affect them personally, often more so than how the proposed changes will affect the overall school.

Unlike private sector organizations, in both preK -12 and higher education, faculty tenure often mitigates against effective rationally-planned school improvement. Tenured faculty may typically only be dismissed by showing a narrowly defined cause, such as immoral conduct, noncompliance with school laws, conviction of a crime, insubordination, or fraud or

misrepresentation (FindLaw, n.d.). As a result, tenured faculty members know that they are unlikely to lose their jobs and dismissal often involves lengthy and costly legal processes (ProCon.org, n.d.). Consequently, it is difficult to coerce tenured faculty members to carry out rational plans if they perceive that it is not in their personal best interest. It is far easier for those faculty members to resist passively/aggressively without threatening their tenured status. Against this negative background, goal-free planning offers some enticing advantages when compared to the traditional approaches.

Positive Reasons Why Educational Leaders May Gravitate toward Goal-Free Planning

One principal reason why educational leaders would favor the goal-free planning approach is its heavy foundation in the organization's culture and climate. Although many attempts have been made in the professional knowledge base to differentiate between these two constructs, there remains no clear, agreed-upon distinction. For example, Martin (2002) compared and contrasted 12 definitions of culture, alone. Harrison and Shirom (1999) defined climate as being people's perceptions of the culture, and Tagiuri (1968) conceptualized culture as one element of climate. Consequently, for this discussion of goal-free planning, they are treated as one interrelated construction, one that is a key element in a school's performance (Cohen, McCabe, Michelle, & Pickeral, 2009; Elbot & Fulton, 2008; Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Alterman, 2008; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009) and in efforts improve that performance (Bulach & Malone, 1994; Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009; French, Bell, & Zawacki, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Schein, 1992, 1999). Sarason (1996) provided one of the most powerful, and most widely accepted, testimonies to the importance of organizational climate and culture in school improvement when he declared that it is often the climate and culture of the organization that must be changed rather than the typical school improvement foci of curriculum, pedagogy, structures, etc.

Another positive attractor of goal-free planning is its emphasis on the individual in the school improvement process. As Evans (2001) explained, the success or failure of school change can generally be attributed to human aspects; resistance to change is natural, but can be overcome. Rogers (2005) is widely recognized for his work on the differential rates at which individual stakeholders accept innovations, categorizing them into such groups as *early adopters, early majority, late majority,* and *laggards.* This closely resembles the work of Hall and Hord (2014), who provided excellent insight into individuals' differential *levels of concern* and *levels of use* of the innovation. This focus on the individual corresponds well to school leaders' current understandings of professional development, which also must situate the individual's knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward a new professional practice in the direction the organization is hoping to move (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010; Joyce & Showers, 1980, 2002; Learningforward, 2011; National Staff Development Council, 2005; Sparks, 1983, 2005; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; SouthWest Development Laboratory, 2011). It also aligns well with current leadership thought on the need to lead through empowerment of all organizational members (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Burns, 1978; Bass, 1997; Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1993; Tichy & Devanna, 1990). As Handy (1994) pointed out, people are not meant to be *empty raincoats*, mere pieces of organizations playing roles; *membership* (involvement) is more important than *ownership* (power). This

individualistic approach to change is also consistent with most major motivation theories (Herzberg, 1966; Maslow, 1943, 1970). Astuto et al. (1994, p. 74) contrasted such empowering leadership with traditional authoritative, top-down leadership as follows: "Decision processes require administrators to seek advice from professional staff and others, develop consensus, and select options consistent with the school's goals, purposes, and processes" or "Decision processes require professional staff to identify and select a range of alternative options consistent with principles of teaching and learning and the value referents on which the school community is based." By focusing on how each individual can best contribute to the organization's chosen direction or thrust, goal-free planning helps to fulfill Slater's (2008, p. 67) contention that "A leader's success will be measured not by the number of followers they have, but rather by the number of individuals that they have inspired to become leaders themselves."

CONCLUSIONS

Schools have a relatively poor history with formal planning, largely because their institutional characteristics do not coincide well with the basic assumptions of the traditional rational planning models. This negative history clouds future planning efforts, as educational leaders and stakeholders resist yet another planning and implementation attempt. However, one model, Clark's goal-free planning approach, aligns well with the characteristics of many schools. Most educational leaders are not cognitively familiar with the goal-free planning model, although if its basic tenets were explained to them, they would likely identify it as an approach they have used and favor. It fits well with the leadership, motivation, professional development, culture and climate nourishment, and emphasis on vision concepts that are at the forefront of educational leadership today.

Is goal-free planning a panacea for school improvement at either the preK – 12 or higher education levels? Most certainly not! Other planning models, e.g., incremental planning, will continue to occupy a prime role in guiding schools. Is goal-free planning a legitimate educational planning model? Certainly! However, it functions best when organizations are not under extreme pressure or time-sensitivity for change, when distributed leadership is prevalent, when the organizational climate and culture is healthy, when the organization is able to coalesce around a shared vision and future priorities and direction (as opposed to highly specific goals), and where related professional development and supervision can be tailored to individual needs within the nomothetic thrusts. Certainly, not all educational organizations possess these admirable qualities and not all situations allow for moderately paced, self-directed changes. However, when these conditions align, educational leaders may be well served to consider employing goal-free planning. Obviously, this then calls for considerably more scholarly reflection, theoretical integration, and research on this approach to planning.

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