

Understanding Transformational Leadership during a Time of Uncertainty

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Abstract

In the past year, the coronavirus has been one of the most unpredictable global health crises that has impacted the United States. The decision to move in person learning to remote learning caused uncertainty and unpredictable challenges for the entire education system. This article will highlight transformational leadership best practices for navigating through uncertainty. Transformational leadership has been one of the most influential leadership models applied to educational leadership over the past several decades (Berkovich, 2016). Hooper and Bernhard (2016) characterized transformational leadership as a model for the school stakeholders to work together for the same common goal.

Keywords: transformational leadership, instructional leadership, uncertainty, leadership practices, student achievement

The coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19 has caused a lot of uncertainty within school districts throughout the United States. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted educators as they attempt to ensure high quality teaching and learning through remote learning. Transitioning to remote learning may require for radical changes in attitude, values and beliefs for some stakeholders (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Doraiswamy (2012) stated that empathy, compassion and flexibility are crucial for crisis management. Instructional leaders impact the direction of schools through their thinking, practices, and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Redding and Corbett (2018) acknowledged the importance of a school's culture, particularly when a leader wants, or needs, to make changes to improve school outcomes. A principal is influential to the successful functioning of a school and the quality of school performance is linked to the principal's style of leadership (Nir & Hameiri, 2014). In order to support remote learning, instructional leaders must use a new toolbox of intellectual stimulation, idealized influence and inspiration (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). This purpose of this article is to highlight transformational leadership best practices for navigating through uncertain challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic.

The Instructional Leader

Glover (2007) stated that real leadership, challenges the leader, before it challenges others. This past year instructional leaders have had to redefine their role. Researchers have indicated that effective leadership influences academic outcomes for students and prepares them for career, college, and life (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Instructional leaders impact student achievement in various ways, such as clearly framing and articulating the school's goals and objectives to collaboratively create a mission for the school (Rey & Bastons, 2018). The instructional leader brings all stakeholders together through a shared mission and everybody moves towards achieving a school's vision through the instructional leader's actions (Kafele, 2017). Ritchie (2013) indicated that an instructional leader must develop a vision as "the single goal of creating and nourishing the best possible environment for teaching and learning" (p. 21). This is acquired through their supportive and caring behavior, in which instructional leaders can positively impact productivity of their staff as a whole (Gülse & Gülenay, 2014; Scallion, 2010). Hitt and Tucker (2016) discussed the strong link between student achievement and how the instructional leader influences expectations for quality instruction. There are many leadership characteristics and practices that influence leaders. Kouzes and Posner (2017) studied leaders from a variety of organizations at all levels to identify five common leadership practices. The five leadership practices are good leaders model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

The Role of the Instructional Leader in Managing Change

The role of the instructional leader is continuously evolving and the demanding expectations are constantly rising. Leadership is "a main indicator in determining the success of an organization" (Goolamally & Ahmad, 2014, p. 123). Leadership during uncertainty involves the need to embrace challenges that will arise. It is important to challenge the process, encourage creativity and learn from mistakes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). School leaders are vital to maintain

sustainable education reform and could be the change agents to move schools from what worked in the past to what is needed for the future (Mercer, 2016). Proper leadership to implement this change requires the ability to influence the thoughts and actions of other people (Taleghani, Salmani, & Taatian, 2011). These alternative models of teaching and learning offer the possibility for educators to reinvent the teaching and learning process (Gonzales & Vodicka, 2012). Because many students are now bombarded by technology at every turn, educational classrooms may benefit from implementing technology tools that could potentially heighten student interest and provide a more personalized learning experience (Gonzales & Vodicka, 2012). Kotter (2012) stated, “Change leadership is much more associated with putting an engine on the whole change process, and making it go faster, smarter, more efficiently.

Transformational Leadership

The transformational leadership theory, according to Berkovich (2016) has been one of the most influential leadership models in education over the past several decades. Prior to being recognized as a leadership model for educational leaders, this model was designed for political and business leaders (Berkovich, 2016). The transformational leadership style is broadly viewed as the most utilized leadership style, because those individuals who practice it try to change, inspire, and engage followers (Hassan, 2008). The transformational leadership theory is leadership that cares less about positional power and more about influential power (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Transformational leadership that is displayed in Figure 1 is a model of leadership that embraces the importance of inspiring and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision along with emphasizing the importance of relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Transformational leaders are interested in converting their followers into leaders (Gardiner, 2006).



Figure 1. Exemplary transformational leadership practices (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

As proposed by Kouzes and Posner (2017) transformational leadership is grounded in the concepts of inspiring and motivating people toward a shared vision to achieve goals at a higher standard. Hooper and Bernhard (2016) characterized transformational leadership as a model for the school stakeholders to work together for the same common goal. A transformational leader intentionally designs structures for collaboration within a school to be culturally responsive and inclusive of all students to support teaching and learning (Hooper & Bernhard, 2016). Kouzes and Posner (2017) conducted an extensive study of over 75,000 leaders over a 30-year time frame and their findings resulted in the creation of a leadership framework that identified five exemplary leadership practices that are transformational: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. According to Kouzes and Posner (2017), these exemplary leadership practices endure over time regardless of the leadership context or generational factors such as age. Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson (2015)

concluded that the five leadership practices from Kouzes and Posner (2017) were frequently identified in high-performing schools.

Researchers have developed leadership models in education that are generally characterized by a set of unique leadership qualities that are clearly articulated and can be applied to different educational contexts (Berkovich, 2016). Even further, building upon previous work in transformational leadership, Poutiatine (2009) developed nine principles of transformational leadership that provide a framework for leaders to follow:

- Transformation is not synonymous with change.
- Transformation requires assent to change.
- Transformation always requires second-order change.
- Transformation involves all aspects of an individual's or organization's life.
- Transformational change is irreversible.
- Transformational change involves a letting go of the myth of control.
- Transformational change involves some aspect of risk, fear, and loss.
- Transformational change always involves a broadening scope of worldview.
- Transformation is always a movement toward a greater integrity of identity—a movement toward wholeness (p. 190).

Conclusion

Ramsey (2009) states that when school leaders communicate effectively, students learn, parents and community members understand and support what the school is doing, and the process of teaching and learning moves forward. However, as school leaders begin to consider implementing the tools needed for personalized learning, they are quickly confronted with the challenges of locating content; finding, hiring, and managing teachers; organizing systems to support students; and selecting and managing technology (Watson & Gemin, 2009). Leading a school as an instructional leader in a time of crisis is stressful especially in times of change. Instructional leaders must work to promote positive relationships with the teachers in the building as relationships and bonds between teachers and principals are vital to the success of collaboration efforts (Malloy & Leithwood, 2017). Instructional leadership practices should focus staff on teaching and learning, inspire teacher belief in the achievement of all students, provided practical assistance in developing faculty knowledge and instructional skills, and create school conditions for teacher potential to meet the needs of all students (Hallinger et al., 2018). “Leaders are learners. They learn from their failures as well as their successes and they make it possible for others to do the same” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 20).

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