Of daffodils and dog teams: Reflections on leadership

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Abstract

As practitioners and theorists alike grapple with the concept of leadership, so it seems that that the concept becomes more opaque. In this paper I suggest that there is an understanding of what leadership IS and that the need is to develop an understanding of HOW it works. Thus, I do not provide yet another definition but rather summarize different types of leadership. I suggest that to adopt any one type does not, in itself, lead to effectiveness or success. Rather, one selects from the variety of styles as the situation demands. Drawing upon my experiences in northern Canada, the metaphor of an Inuit dog-team is used to illustrate how this may be achieved.
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When my grandmother saw the first daffodils of spring bursting through the ground, she knew exactly what to expect. Stately yellow blooms nodding on big green stems, the same in her garden as Wordsworth had observed on the hills above Ullswater. Now, as I watch the young shoots fight their way through the mud of a Canadian spring, I have to consult my planting guide (Breck's, 1997). Is this a clump of the pure white blooms of the Mount Hood, or the yellow of the giant Jonquil, or the orange-red of the Fortissimo, or the double-pink of the Rosy Clouds ….

As it is with daffodils, so it is with leadership. It seems that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are those who write about the concept. In graduate courses and programs across North America and beyond a new generation is taught about Theories X, Y, and Z, about 9-9 managerial grids and System 4 organizations, about linking pins and loose coupling … often failing, it seems to take into account the warning of Hughes (1994) that we "must be skeptical of simplistic models of leadership" (p. 7). In this paper I do not attempt to provide a single conceptualization of what leadership is, nor do I attempt to develop a scale by which leadership ability might be measured and analyzed. To do so would be to suggest that leadership is a concept which can be pinned down like a butterfly on a board, or bottled like glacial water, and that a single person can, on their own, provide the consumers with such a product. Although Fiedler (1996) regales us with stories of idiosyncratic leaders such as Iacocca and Washington, and cautions us to accept that "leadership does make a difference" (p. 241), generally the singular, and perhaps simplistic, notion of a 'great man' theory of leadership has been placed on the compost heap of history. The issue which subsequently needs to be
addressed is concerned with what remains after the 'great man' theory has been discarded.

What, now, is leadership?

**Introduction**

In this article the focus is on the concept of leadership as it relates to the role of the school-based administrator, head-teacher, or principal. In locating leadership within this role I ignore those elements which pertain to other decision making functions within education, such as the superintendency (Berg, 1995; Patterson, 1993). Further, the role of the principal is presented within the context of a 'western' education system, specifically one which draws upon the Anglo-Canadian experience. Thus those issues raised by Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), or by Heck (1996), with respect to the observation of leadership outside the western context, are not part of this discussion. Finally, I take an individual, rather than institutional (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995), perspective and thus ignore those elements related to the sharing of leadership functions (Hajnal, Sackney, Walker, & Shakotko, 1997) or the development of teacher leaders (Hart, 1994).

In reviewing the literature it is apparent that many different types of leadership have been identified. The administrative equivalents of Dutch botanists are working overtime to develop new varieties for the jaded palettes of those who would analyze the role and function of practitioners who somehow seem to make a difference in the operation of schools. In this paper I briefly summarize fourteen different strains of leadership which have been identified. I then suggest that to adopt any one of these forms of leadership is, in itself, not a means to achieve success as a principal. Rather, it is necessary for the administrator of a school to select from a variety of leadership styles as the situation
permits. The metaphor of an Inuit dog-team is used to illustrate how this may be achieved.

**Leadership**

To define leadership is a task which has caught the imagination of both practitioners and academics over the years. Once defined, however, the problem arises that we try to teach the concept, as though it were learnable (e.g., Smith & Piele, 1997). Leadership is not learnable in the sense that one might learn how to boil an egg; once the basic idea of boiling water and leaving the egg in that water for three to five minutes is mastered, one might boil eggs all over the world with a certain degree of impunity.

Leadership is not so simply learned. Leadership is a concept both multidimensional and multifaceted, where the values, goals, beliefs, and decision-making skills of the principal give purpose and meaning to the policies and procedures which she is duty-bound to implement. These policies and procedures, however, together with the norms of the school context within which they are implemented, are not set by the principal or the school but rather are established and affected by national, provincial, divisional, and local pressure groups. The contextuality of leadership is such that the principal must be knowledgeable of, and able to appropriately adopt, a variety of different leadership styles. Here follows a brief description of 14 such styles, identified from the literature.

**Managerial Leadership**

The managerial leader focuses on the maintenance of a system. S/he puts great effort into planning and organizing the day-to-day operations of the school. Budgets are carefully constructed and rigorously monitored, resources are located and allocated, subordinates are coordinated and controlled, strategic and tactical plans are designed,
prioritized and implemented. The focus, as Bolman and Deal (1992) have observed, is on the rationality, efficiency, structure, and policies of the structural frame.

**Instructional Leadership**

This style of leadership was very popular in the early 1980s. The focus of the principal was seen to be on the promotion of an effective instructional climate, on providing teachers with advice and support as they delivered the curriculum. On such understandings were predicated the efforts of the effective schools movement (e.g., Edmunds, 1979; Lezotte, 1989; Teddlie, Stringfield, Wimpleberg, & Kirby, 1989) as attempts were made to develop a menu of strategies from which a principal could draw.

**Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf (1977) argued that the legitimate power of the leader only develops if the leader sees him or herself as a servant of those being led. The leader has to achieve balance between their operating talent (which carries the organization forward in its daily tasks and objectives) and their conceptual talent (which permits them to see the whole within the perspective of time, both past and present). The leader is not so much a charismatic visionary preacher as a cloistered monk or nun, one who views his or her role as a vocation where the desire to serve outweighs any need for peer recognition or professional advancement.

**White Knight Leadership**

Sometimes, a leader is ‘parachuted’ in to a school in order to ‘fix’ real or perceived problems. This rescuer is often dubbed a “white knight”, for s/he brings rescue to those isolated in the dragon’s cave. If wholesale staff transfers or redundancies are required, however, the metaphor changes from chivalry to the wild west, and the new leader is said
to “wear a black hat” as s/he cleans up the lawless town. Such a perspective assumes that schools are tightly coupled organizations within which the actions of one person, who embodies all the leadership qualities in that school, might have a significant and lasting impact. As Murphy, Hallinger and Mitman (1983) observed, this perspective also assumes that the principal can control his or her own work flow.

**Indirect Leadership**

The recognition that not all leadership is embodied within an individual is recognized in this style. Here, strategies are implemented which facilitate the empowerment of all staff to provide leadership. The focus is on the human and symbolic frames of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 1992). It is recognized that the 20 year veteran teacher may be a more powerful leader than the person with their nameplate on the office door.

**Collaborative Leadership**

Lugg and Boyd (1993) suggest that the principal must establish external and internal linkages for the school. Externally, these linkages would require better communication, cooperation, collaboration and coordination with social agencies, community institutions, and the like. Internally, trust and collegiality must be established between teachers, students, and administrators. The principal must facilitate this collaborative process if leadership is to be effective.

**Ethical Leadership**

There has been a growing recognition that the work of leaders is predicated on the value and belief systems which they hold. Notions of caring, of justice, of ethics, are the foundations on which observed behaviour is constructed. The works of Greenfield (1993/1977) and Hodgkinson (1996), for example, address these issues. The actions of
the leader can not be separated from the value positions held, for understandings of
‘right’, ‘wrong’, or even ‘(not)appropriate’, depend upon recognition of individual world
views and beliefs.

**Dialogical Leadership**

Freire (1970) suggested that those with whom the leader was interacting often had a
more complete understanding of their situation than did the leader. Thus, it was
incumbent upon the leader to establish a dialogue with those whom s/he wished to lead.
Only through discussion could truth be determined and appropriate action developed and
implemented – action appropriate not only to the leader but to the followers as well.

**Transcultural Leadership**

The recognition that contemporary workforces are not culturally homogeneous has led
to the development of the notion of transcultural leadership (Simons, Vazquez & Harris,
1993). There is a need for leaders to be sensitive to, recognize, and accept different
cultural values and beliefs. The leader must recognize both the *emic* (perspective of self)
and *etic* (perspective of the observer) in every situation. Thus, when someone of an
ethnocultural background different from the principal behaves in a certain way, the
effective leader is able to not only determine his or her own perspective but to recognize
the underlying values and meanings of that behaviour from the perspective of the person
making the action.

**Situational Leadership**

The work of Hersey and Blanchard (1977) has been expanded to embrace the tenets of
contingency theory. Through effective boundary scanning and the judicious development
of contingency plans, the effective leader utilizes the situation to gain power, control, and
influence over the actions of subordinates (Fiedler, 1974/1993). Such negotiation, compromising, coalition building, and resource allocation are the hallmarks of the political actor (Bolman & Deal, 1992).

**Influencing Leadership**

The purpose of this leadership style is to achieve organizational goals by enhancing the productivity and satisfaction of the workforce. Such a person must, according to Miklos (1983), be sensitive to the issues of the day, know the source of those issues, and be able to recognize what values are involved. In maintaining a balance between contradictory forces, the leader can use these tensions to bring about change in practice.

**Marxiavellian Leadership**

Recognizing that there are class distinctions within the staff, student, and parental bodies, the principal uses persuasion and exchange to manipulate the allocation of resources (Goddard, 1993). The subclasses of gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, and so forth, are played off against each other so the goals of the organization can be better achieved. Resources are allocated to the area where they might best serve the long term needs of the organization as determined by the principal.

**Transformational Leadership**

The principal is not content with being the only leader in the school. Rather, s/he facilitates the development of leadership abilities within all the staff. S/he does this by identifying and articulating a vision for the school, conveying expectations for high levels of performance, and providing both intellectual stimulation and individualized support (Leithwood, 1994). The staff are transformed from being followers to becoming leaders within the organization.
Constructivist Leadership

Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, and Slack (1995) suggest that leadership is not learned but rather is made by the leader and the followers, working together. They argue that traditional models are male-thinking and need to be carefully analyzed, as women’s ways of knowing may lead to different leadership methods. In constructing what leadership, and perhaps as importantly agreeing on what it is not, all members of the staff participate in both its development and practice.

Lessons from the Inuit

In the high arctic the winds scour the land. There is little precipitation. The low plains are covered with a thin veneer of snow, which then blows around for months, alternatively obscuring and revealing the natural features of the landscape. The ice cracks and heaves, sometimes forming high ridges and at other times parting to reveal the cold slate sea.

Across this land travels the Inuk, his means of transportation the komatiq, a sled drawn by a dozen or more dogs. These dogs are not harnessed in a neat row, as are the dogs of the Dene or the Woods Cree, for there is no need here to navigate through the closely growing trees of the northern or Boreal forest. Rather, the dogs are each tied to individual lines connected to the front of the komatiq. The Inuk will change the position of the dogs as he sees fit, for some are better in the areas where there are open leads of water, being somehow able to tell when thin ice will bear the weight of the sled and its supplies. Others are better suited to finding the easiest ways across a series of ice ridges which might rise so high they block the horizon. Yet others can sense the location of a
predatory polar bear, and guide the Inuk away from the danger before he even knows it exists.

The land is open but it is not empty. There are many obstacles between the Inuk and his destination. It is in his ability to read the landscape, to select the correct lead dog for the circumstances, that he pins his survival.

The school principal exists in a similarly forbidding terrain. His or her landscape is full of dangers, both hidden and observed, and there are many obstacles between the place where the school exists now and the destination described in the vision statement so carefully constructed. The principal pins her or his survival on the ability to read this landscape, to select the correct leadership style for the circumstances, and to guide the komatiq which is the school across the wasteland to the safety of the camp.

The sled is loaded with a variety of bundles. Here, in the center, are the students. At the front, mainly, with a smaller bundle at the back, are the teachers. Pushed in to the back are the parents, and along the sides the community, the school board, provincial department of education employees, university professors, and other miscellaneous groups. Crammed into all the available nooks and crannies are the resources for the school, possibly not enough for the journey but all that were available when the time to travel arrived. The principal checks the load, makes sure that everything is tied down, and scans the horizon through squinting eyes.

The destination is known, for s/he has been there before, but never from this place. The destination is over the horizon, and the first part of the journey is across unfamiliar ground. A tentative path is determined, the principal mentally mapping the territory s/he can see in front of him/her. S/he selects the leadership style which s/he thinks is most
appropriate for this terrain, and harnesses it in the lead position. The other styles are tied on individually, extending in a fan shape from the central hitch. Each will share in the pulling of the sled, but only one will be breaking trail at any given time. As the land changes, as different circumstances arise which require different tactics, so the principal will change the lead style around. It is in the ability to predict which style will be appropriate before there is an emergency that the effective principal will make a difficult journey appear quite untoward.

With the dogs hitched, the sled loaded, and the direction set, the Inuk does not consider his task complete. He does not now climb aboard the komatiq and rest. Rather, he runs alongside the sled, urging the dogs to run faster, to slow down for that patch of soft snow, to veer left in order to avoid the widest leads, to stop and huddle in the lee of a ridge so as to avoid an oncoming storm. Sometimes he uses his whip, pushing them to greater efforts. Sometimes he hauls upon the ice brake, slowing the team from its breakneck pace. Sometimes he jumps onto the edge of the sled and tightens a rope, or rearranges the load for better balance, or shifts an unwieldy bundle to another part of the sled. Sometimes, perhaps, across a rare smooth field of ice, he sits on the back of the komatiq and waggles his feet and enjoys the view.

For most of the time, however, the principal is scanning the landscape. Is that a storm coming up over the horizon, is that a problem following behind in the tracks, is that a soft spot ahead where special care must be taken? Is the load properly balanced, are the various bundles in a proper relationship to each other, is the optimum load being carried for the resources available? These are the questions asked by the principal on a daily basis, for although the questions seldom differ, the answers are rarely the same.
Conclusions

This, then, is leadership for the new millenium. It is neither static nor discrete, neither bounded nor prescribed. Rather, informed by our knowledge of the landscape through which we must pass, assisted by our ability to read our changing environment, the leader guides the school across difficult terrain towards an established goal. S/he selects different leadership styles as appropriate, but does not discard the ones which are not best suited for the task in hand. Rather, s/he uses their strengths as needed, and keeps the different styles close so that s/he might always be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. S/he cajoles and inspires, threatens and rewards, and sometimes gets the opportunity to rest along the way. At such times the journey becomes worthy of the effort, and there comes a moment to relax and gaze at the flowers along the way. For,

in vacant and in pensive mood
they flash upon that inward eye
which is the bliss of solitude.
References


