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# The Shift in Leadership Styles: Joyful to Toxic

M. Adam Carswell

*Nova Southeastern University*, [acarsewel@mynsu.nova.edu](mailto:acarsewel@mynsu.nova.edu)

Melissa Sasso

*Nova Southeastern University*, [ms3303@mynsu.nova.edu](mailto:ms3303@mynsu.nova.edu)

David B. Ross

*Nova Southeastern University*, [daviross@nova.edu](mailto:daviross@nova.edu)

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**The Shift in Leadership Styles: Joyful to Toxic**

by

M. Adam Carswell, M.S.  
Nova Southeastern University

Melissa T. Sasso, Ed.D.  
Nova Southeastern University

David B. Ross, Ed.D.  
Nova Southeastern University

## **The Shift in Leadership Styles: Joyful to Toxic**

### **Inspired to Lead: Words of an Educational Leader**

I vividly recall the moment I felt compelled to shift into school leadership. The Lower and Middle School Heads with whom I had the good fortune of working served as exceptional role models, and were ultimately the catalyst to my move out of the classroom. They made school leadership look easy and rewarding – I quickly learned the latter to be very true, the former not always the case! While in the classroom, I relished the fact that I could have such a profound impact on the students I taught. I made the transition into school leadership because I felt it would provide an opportunity to magnify my ability to make a difference in the lives of students, teachers, and parents. Reflecting upon the two decades I have been privileged to serve as a teacher and leader at independent schools, some things have changed, yet many remain the same. Parents always want the best for their children, and no matter their actions, come from a good place. Students are still the highlight of the work I do. Teachers are the most dedicated, caring, and hardworking people on the planet. In addition, school leaders have a tremendous impact on school climate, for good and not so good.

Through my doctoral dissertation research on effective school leadership and its impact on school climate, I confirmed what I anecdotally noted these past twenty years: School leaders set the tone for teachers and parents, who in turn set the tone for children. Over a century ago, New York City principal Arthur Perry (1908) penned the book, *Management of a City School*, in which he underscored the importance of providing a positive learning climate for students. When teachers feel supported, appreciated, and generally extract authentic satisfaction from the work they do, they will wake up (most mornings!) and want to come to school. When teachers feel inspired and fulfilled, they create joyful and engaging classroom environments where

students feel safe to take risks, try new things, and ultimately experience greater success at school.

### **The Good, the Bad, and the Whaaat?**

There is much debate about a person who is born with either leadership characteristics or with the development of leadership characteristics. Either viewpoint, the question can also be asked about the leadership style: transformational, transactional or laissez-faire. There is an abundance of surveys that determine many aspects of a person's leadership style, but also those that pertain to brain dominance, communication style, personality traits, and many more aspects of human behavior. When results of a survey, for instance, determine a dominant style over another style (i.e., the category of characteristics), the individual still possesses these characteristics of each style, unless a person scored zero in a specific category. For example, if a person had completed the Herrmann Brain Dominance questionnaire and did not score a zero in any of the four quadrants, the individual could have more than one dominant style, but still, have some characteristics of the other quadrants. In leadership, a person could possess traits from transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire, as well as narcissistic and toxic styles.

This leads to our discussion regarding three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. If a person can demonstrate different characteristics of brain dominance, could they share many commonalities amongst the various leadership styles? Leaders who have taken this brain dominance assessment have gained an enhanced understanding of their own and others' preferred thinking styles, which has resulted in improved communication, working relationships and creativity within their teams. If an individual possesses only one leadership style, is there a way to determine if they will lead with good intention or not lead by control or influence? Power can be sought through many areas regarding

transformation leadership (i.e., influence, transactional leadership (i.e., control), and/or laissez-faire (i.e., turns the power over to the followers). Many leaders have either used their leadership views to benefit their organization and communities or have done harm, thus creating a toxic culture. Even if a leader seems positive, there could be issues causing chaos within the organizational structure to include personality differences based on many philosophies of leadership or not as no one individual is a demigod. No leader is infallible, but it would be great to empower their followers.

*Transformational* leaders are able to envision a new social condition and can communicate this vision to followers. The leader inspires followers to take action toward positive change that result in the betterment of the organization as well as individual success. Kareem (2016) stated that this type of leadership promotes successful organizations in addition to employees having better luck to being promoted. Transformational leaders authentically engage with followers in a meaningful way and lead with high levels of morality and integrity. This is the gold standard of leadership within independent schools. According to Bealer and Bhanugopan (2014), a *transactional* leader considers leadership as an exchange between themselves and their followers (i.e., exchange for something). A political leader, for example, might obtain constituents' support in exchange for programs promised during an election campaign. Within an independent school, a leader might negotiate with teachers in an effort to achieve programmatic objectives without taking the time necessary to provide context and ascertain authentic teacher buy-in. *Laissez-faire* leaders use delegative characteristics found within situational leadership to release themselves from the responsibility of decision-making. Laissez-faire leadership can lead to varied outcomes: followers may develop enhanced confidence in their abilities, organizationally productivity may decline, or complete chaos may

ensue given the lack of information necessary to adequately complete work tasks (Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014; Zareen, Razzaq, & Mujtaba, 2015). It is best practice for school leaders to provide autonomy for faculty to try new things and develop leadership skills, engage constituents in the process of decision-making, and actively listen to the feedback and ideas of others. However, haphazardly delegating decision-making or ebbing and flowing to keep constituents content do not reflect the strong leadership practice our independent schools require to function optimally.

### **A Cautionary Tale**

Ineffective leaders have the potential to drive teachers to lock their doors and work as independent contractors; to duck and cover just to get through the day. Poor leaders undermine teachers' ability to do what they know is in the best interest of the children they teach. A 2014 study conducted by Green (as cited in Sasso, 2017) revealed a shockingly significant presence of self-serving egotistical leaders within schools, with high rates (e.g., 61%) of micromanaging and controlling behaviors. Teachers have been leaving the field of education and avoiding leadership roles at alarming rates due to negative school climates and toxic leadership. As Ross, Matteson, and Exposito (2014) indicated, toxic leadership takes a toll on both the mental and physical health of employees, in addition to an increase in counterproductive work behavior, coming to work late, resignation, or transfers.

Toxic leadership is evident when leaders demonstrate aggression towards their employees' personalities and abilities (Chua & Murray, 2015). That stated, toxic leadership characteristics consist of the leader criticizing their employees' performance, not allocating the deserved credit to their employees for their ideas, but rather utilizing it as their own, in addition

to demeaning their employees in front of their colleagues (Chua & Murray, 2015). A leader is considered toxic if they create serious long-term harm to their employees (Pelletier, 2012).

Unfortunately, some leaders allow their current moods to create the climate of their organization, as illustrated in Green's (2014) study. Common characteristics found amongst such leaders include, but are not limited to ethical failure, incompetence, and neurosis. As Sasso (2017) indicated, a study conducted by Green illustrated that participants were aware that their leader was toxic by working for them less than a year. Furthermore, Mahlangu (as cited in Sasso, 2017) stated that there are a plethora of negative effects that toxic leadership has on teaching as well as learning in schools. These include intolerable working relationships amongst stakeholders, which in turn produced a multitude of negative effects. Regions known to have high-achieving educational systems such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada have experienced relatively low teacher attrition rates - only 3% to 4% annually, compared with United States rates, which have hovered around 8% over the last decade. Furthermore, applicants to teacher education programs have sharply declined by 35% between 2009 and 2014 (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

While contrasting *old* and *new* leadership, Green (2012) emphasized the transition of effective leadership from a reliance on power, to a reliance on trust. Trust, however, is not one-sided. In schools, taking risks is critical – it is the essence of learning boiled down to its barest element. Without risk, learning cannot happen. Without trust, risks become a rarity. Teasley (2017) contended that the climate of a school, both conscious and unconscious, could either build cohesion and strength, or erode the integrity and effectiveness of the learning that takes place.

## **What Next?**

A great deal of conversation about sustainability and independent schools has taken place in recent years; succession planning and leadership development must be a part of those conversations moving forward. The development of teacher leadership, however, is largely reliant on the support of school leaders. It is our responsibility to provide teachers with opportunities develop leadership skills, work with mentors, provide encouragement, and engage teachers in the myriad of formal programs designed to nurture the next generation of independent school leaders.

## **About the Authors**

Adam Carswell is in his 12th year as Lower School Head at independent schools in Canada and the United States and is an advocate of creating positive, joyful, and engaging school climates. He recently completed a doctoral dissertation entitled, *Understanding Leadership Factors that Contribute to Positive, Joyful, and Engaging Climates at Independent Schools*.

Dr. Melissa Sasso has a couple of years of experience as an autism cluster teacher and is now looking to transition in the higher education field. She recently completed a doctoral dissertation entitled, *How Narcissists Cannot Hold an Organization Together: A Mixed Method Approach to a Fictitious Puzzle Factory*.

Dr. David B. Ross is a professor at the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education at Nova Southeastern University. While serving as their dissertation chair, Dr. Ross found it intriguing to have two students researching leadership from polar opposite perspectives. Dr. Ross brought the authors together to write this article.



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