

School leaders communicating in complex organisations

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Abstract

In this paper I explore how communication is used within a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in a London secondary school. Effective communication can impact upon the ability of the leadership team to be aware of developments both internally and externally. It is suggested that communication either includes others in a shared conversation (illocutionary) or downward and excludes participation (prelocutionary). This paper suggests an illocutionary approach is more effective for distributed leadership.

Keywords: Leadership; Complexity Theory; Communication; Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS).

Introduction

The development of leadership in recent years within schools has placed greater emphasis on the development of leadership styles where the transformational and the instructional gives way to leaders who focus on learning and distributed leadership (Coleman & Early 2005). Brookes (2008) and Brookes & Grint (2010) refer to this movement towards leadership over management as a New Public Leadership Challenge.

Effective school leadership is a key driver for improving schools in England (DfE 2010) with leaders seen as affecting improved outcomes through their influence on teachers (Slater 2011). The Education White Paper (DfE 2010) also discusses how to free headteachers to make decisions that they see best meet the needs of their organisation. However, changes to Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection criteria set the end goals, and school leaders have to decide how best to achieve these ends as well as addressing their core values and beliefs around education. This may be

a constrained freedom but it certainly grants a much greater level of decentralisation than under previous governmental administrations.

This article aims to explore the role that strategic leadership plays in driving and leading the organisation to achieve outcomes that are conducive to successful learning establishments. This small-scale study investigates how school leaders in an east London comprehensive school implement and operate effective channels of communication. The central question for this paper is: do strategic leaders' communications with staff reflect the complex nature of their organisation through open (illocutionary) communication or do they tend to be prelocutionary?

Strategic leadership

In this section I define what strategic leadership means as well as considering the characteristics that are representative of both transformative and transactional leaders.

For Middlewood, being a strategic thinker and leader requires the ability to see through events. It is having the ability 'to make intelligent guesses about the future' (Middlewood & Lumby, p. 7). Therefore, it involves 'anticipating scenarios and the realistic understanding of what will be involved in implementing action in those scenarios' (p. 8). Stacey (2011) is critical of the current acceptance of strategic leadership in some quarters. He questions the validity of present thinking by pointing out that it is a recent phenomenon that has changed over the last three decades. This can also be viewed as a key strength as thinking is constantly developing. However, he is right to bring an element of criticality to the ways in which strategic leadership is viewed. Essentially, present models are overly linear (Stacey 2011) and do not reflect the complex nature of organisations and the context they operate in (Morrison 2008). Stacey (2011) further argues that the dominant strategic leadership discourse is not uncontested.

'Instead, it is a set of highly contested concepts' (p. 14). Stacey (2011) also questions whether there is an evidence base to claim that organisational and management science is a science. Rather for him, it is an 'ideology which sustains particular power relations between managers and society' (p. 14).

Senge (2006) casts doubt on the ability of strategic leaders to plan strategically for the future because long-term thinking is 'very often reactive and short-term' (p. 196). These plans often reveal more about problems today than about future opportunities. This leads to a discussion on the nature of leaders and leadership.

Leadership types

Burns (1978) and later Bass (1985) both refer to leadership types as either being transformational or transactional as they both identify 'leaders by their actions and the impact those actions have on others' (Kuhnert & Lewis 1987, p. 648). A transactional leader is one where those being led will be looked after and benefit from carrying out contractual duties as envisaged by the leader (Coleman 2005). A transformational leader is one who has idealised influence and who promotes inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Coleman 2005). Kuhnert & Lewis (1987) in addition view a transformational leader as value-driven and 'by expressing their personal standards, [they] are able both to unite followers and to change followers' goals and beliefs' (p. 649). A transactional leader needs to maintain control of resources and their allocation in order to lead others (Kuhnert & Lewis 1987). Senge et al. (1999) criticise the need or dependence upon a 'hero leader' that will make an organisation better, as change does not necessarily come from the top of an organisation but from within, which can be seen as more accepting of a distributed leadership model.

The National College uses evidence from research to confirm the effectiveness of transformational leaders in schools (Leithwood et al. 2006). The work of Leithwood et al. (2006) states, 'the effects of transformational school leadership on pupil engagement are significantly positive' (p. 5). In their view, effective leadership is second only to effective teaching as a driver of improved student outcomes, although 'effects of school leadership on pupil outcomes are small but educationally significant' (Leithwood et al. 2006, p. 4). They further argue that this figure although small accounts for 12–20% of impact on student outcomes with teaching achieving around a third (Leithwood et al. 2006). However, Barker (2005) claims that there is

a lack of robust evidence within the education setting to show that transformational leaders improve school results (GCSE grades) and that 'we need to develop a better understanding of the links between changes in effectiveness and changes in performance' (Barker 2005, p. 112). This contrasts with Slater's (2011) recent view that 'school principals exert influence on teachers, who in turn affect student achievement' (p. 219).

Evidence from the literature does point to strategic leadership and the transformational leader as key drivers in effective organisations. Leithwood et al. (2006), for example, show that the attributes of a transformational leader are most commonly associated with successful leadership in schools that can create and build a unifying vision, shows individual consideration and is idealised (Coleman 2005). The role of strategic leaders therefore is to foster a climate where leadership is distributed and the potential of each leader recognised and developed (Morrison 2002).

Leading a complex adaptive system

The dominant discourse around strategic leadership has been linear in thinking (Stacey 2011) and it needs to be non-linear and adaptive (Mason 2008; Morrison 2008). This linear approach is not reflective of our knowledge-based era (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007). Senge (2006) notes how our management by quotas has led to a loss learning and 'unknown and unknowable' (p. 16). Senge (2006) is effectively saying that focusing exclusively on quotas can lead to leaders developing blind spots to new threats, challenges or opportunities. This approach of incentivising employees to follow top-down visions controlled by senior leaders, with its emphasis on performance management, 'can stifle a firm's innovation and fitness' (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007).

Schools 'exhibit many features of complex adaptive systems, being dynamical and unpredictable, non-linear organisations operating in unpredictable and changing external environments' (Morrison 2008, p. 19). This is not to say that school leaders are aware that they are leading a complex adaptive system (CAS) as they may still conceive of their organisation as a system that needs to follow linear models and not be adaptive (Morrison 2002). The fact that schools are dynamical and unpredictable, in large part because they are dealing with individuals with the potential for a myriad of actions, makes them complex systems. The point to address is whether schools are also adaptive.

Effective communications are key in ensuring schools are adaptive. Literature points to strategic leaders playing an important role in developing staff (Coleman 2005) responding to change from internal and external stimulus, ensuring effective communication (Kotter 1996; Senge 2006) within a school internally and externally (Morrison 2002) while creating an environment of learning (Senge 2006).

In this study, communication is seen as a key factor in ensuring leading of change programmes (Kotter 1996). Ensuring an appropriate change is the responsibility of the senior leadership team and is a strategic activity. This is not the same as suggesting it is the preserve of the senior leadership team but of all leaders in an organisation so 'communication must be open and multi-directional' (Morrison 2002, p. 59).

To sum up, schools do 'exhibit many features of complex adaptive systems, being dynamical and unpredictable, non-linear organisations operating in unpredictable and changing external environments. Indeed schools both shape and adapt to macro- and micro-societal change, organising themselves, responding to, and shaping their communities and society (i.e. all parties co-evolve)' (Morrison 2008, p. 19).

Research approach

In this small-scale study, two senior leaders from a school in a London borough were interviewed. As a basis for conducting a small-scale research project into a school a case study was conducted using Bassey's prescriptive definition of case study research (2002, pp. 142–5). The research tool utilised was semi-structured interviews (Drever 2003; Wragg 2002).

Analysis

The two SLT interviewees were different in their approach to communicating both externally and internally. Deputy Head 1 (DH1) placed greatest emphasis on communicating with and to the Headteacher. When I asked DH1 about opportunity for feedback she referred to the Headteacher providing her with feedback on department minutes that DH1 had forwarded to the Headteacher. There was no indication of feedback to those being line-managed. Often DH1 mentioned it is what 'Headteacher wants' or 'it is how Headteacher is'. However, Deputy Head 2 (DH2) did not mention the Headteacher once and referred to how they communicated and what

was best for them and those they managed. The two interviewees at no time used terms relating to their perception of the SLT as a team. DH1 always mentioned the Headteacher and referred to her often and in positive terms. DH2 did not mention the Headteacher at all and always talked about his role and how he communicated with others. This implied that the SLT was not in effect a team but a collection of individual leaders (Kotter 1996).

A further difference was in whom they communicated with. DH1 referred to all staff, all parents and the Headteacher whereas DH2 listed external agencies and those that were line-managed by him. DH2 found it easier to list the external agencies he communicated with and had to stop and think about those he communicated with internally. However, neither mentioned the communication between members of the SLT at any time. When I raised communicating within the team, it was spoken of as reporting to Headteacher. This implies a hierarchical structure to communication rather than a distributed leadership model. It also implies that communication was about reporting and, as in the case of DH1, was completely unfiltered. For DH1 all information was kept and all information was passed to the head, and communications to the head from outside agencies were passed on to all staff for information, although DH1 felt all staff 'ignored the emails because they were not relevant to their day-to-day concerns'.

DH2 took a completely different approach and only communicated where it was essential to do so. He also preferred informal settings such as staffroom, classrooms or corridors as 'I don't see the need to keep calling meetings as often the issue only takes a few moments to explain'. As both these quotes illustrate, at no time is there any emphasis on dialogue between colleagues as both saw communication as being about either passing on information or instructions, with DH1 referring to the need to hold on to communications for accountability purposes. DH2 preferred individual one-to-one communications as he felt these were most effective as 'talking in meetings was the worst way to communicate unless it was one to one'. This fits with Morrison's (2008) view that 'the richer the message the greater the need for face to face communication' (p. 152). DH1 preferred formal communications via whole staff meetings, or use of printed bulletins to all staff and parents. This was at odds with DH1's view expressed on several occasions that staff only see information as important if it affects their day-to-day role. DH2 was keen to discuss the merits of face-to-face communication as he felt more

able to assess whether the person had taken 'on board and understood what was being discussed'. He felt face-to-face afforded the other person the chance to ask questions if they were uncertain. The use of face-to-face communication is recommended by Larkin & Larkin (1994) but is time-consuming and in this case limited to the people that DH2 communicates with. Conversely DH1 does not use this approach and prefers an audit of discussions and decisions.

DH2 was also keen on using the 'method of communicating that best suited who he was communicating with' adding that the medium must also match the message (Morrison, 2008). DH2 had a role that meant that he spent more time communicating with non-teachers and outside agencies than DH1. This, I assume, would lead to more face-to-face opportunities because it is likely that during on-site meetings it is best to actually look at and discuss problems. The lack of a SLT approach to communication was highlighted by DH2's comments about making sure those he line-managed took on more leadership. He described his approach as 'testing to see if the individual can cope with leading'. He was also keen to 'move leadership down to colleagues once it is more established.' From the discussion with DH2 he was referring to his setting up a project or system and then allowing others to take over. His approach was more befitting to a distributed leadership model, but his views in no way reflected that of DH1 who saw the Headteacher as the leader and themselves as a link between the Headteacher and staff. This reflects the view that the head was the hero leader (Senge et al. 1999).

From the interviews undertaken, it can be inferred that the SLT has not thought about communicating as a team. The responses show each Deputy Head teacher adopts an approach that suits them and their particular context. DH1 prefers the comfort of formal audited communications and has a need to communicate with the Headteacher, which is her hero leader (Senge 2006), whereas DH2 appears to have an approach that demonstrates elements of distributed leadership in that he allows others to lead whenever he feels they are capable. He was unconcerned how they led only that the outcome was achieved. DH2 saw leadership sharing as the most 'pragmatic way' of getting things done and he chose an approach to communicating that suited the situation in his view. However, DH1 was a means of communicating between the Headteacher and staff. DH1 also saw herself within a hierarchy that had the Headteacher at the top.

As mentioned before, DH2 seemed, upon analysis of interviews, divorced from the SLT as it was very much his preferred ways of communicating that informed his thinking. His approach to data storage illustrated this as he only kept what was important to him and archived everything else. He joked 'this is for Headteacher really as she is always asking for previous emails and paperwork'. DH1 kept all communications, and in particular paper copies and printouts. Regarding efficient retrieval and storage of knowledge/information it was apparent that again the SLT had not thought about communication carefully. No mention was ever made of needing to retain data for analysis, which once analysed and presented appropriately became management information with which to make informed decisions. It was primarily about creating audit trails.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here has identified that a strategic leader needs to be able to assess the fitness landscape (Boal & Schultz 2007) before them but also the organisation's ability to respond to the new and rapidly changing landscape (Bush 2011). The premise of the paper is that an organisation that is strategically led within the complex nature of its context would survive and thrive much more readily than an organisation that is not so responsive to internal and external stimuli. A further finding is that a CAS is effective at coping with an ever-changing landscape. CAS requires open, effective and efficient communication that has a distributed leadership where all can contribute to the knowledge about the school and its environment (Mason 2008; Morrison 2002).

Notes

¹A complex adaptive system (CAS) is a large system such as a school that is made up of multiple interconnected elements that have the capacity to learn from experience and change (Cameron & Green 2012).

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