TACKLING COMPLEX EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES THROUGH ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Vicki L. Squires

Educational institutions are becoming increasingly complex (Fullan, 2008; Hargreaves, 2009; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Owens, 2004; Sackney & Walker, 2006; Trombly, 2014). Owens (2004) contended, "Educational organizations today are confronted by demands for near-constant change in dealing with problems that are highly complex, often ill-understood, and ambiguous and with outcomes that are uncertain. Such organizations must be nimble, adaptable, and responsive" (p. 280). Sackney and Walker (2006) emphasized that building capacity in schools is complex, because principals need to possess a broad array of competencies and skills; these skills include, for example, communication, group process facilitation, conflict mediation, and data management. In particular, new principals need support in building their personal capacity in order to more successfully tackle the complex challenges they encounter (Sackney & Walker, 2006).

One ongoing challenge is the tension between the model of shared leadership and the traditional, hierarchical leadership, the latter of which typically exists in most schools (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011; Murphy, 2005; Owens, 2004). Currently, within the bureaucratic structures of schools, leadership and authority are enshrined in the school's formal administration. Leadership is not widely distributed among the staff but is centrally located in a top-down model. Mitchell and Sackney (2011) noted that central and school-based administration has been reticent to adapt organizational structures in schools.

However, one emergent type of leadership model is adaptive leadership, where multiple leaders complete tasks and share responsibility for accomplishing those tasks (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). In doing so, "Consequences of high collective teacher efficacy will be the acceptance of challenging goals, strong organizational effort, and a persistence that leads to better performance" (Hoy & Miskel, 2005, p. 178). This type of shared leadership is distinctive from distributed leadership where tasks are diffused among a number of leaders who are individually responsible for accomplishing those specific tasks. Fullan (2008) suggested that the term distributed leadership is too vague and has been misused. He noted that a better approach is to conceive of leadership as "interactively shared—thereby coalescing the collective effort of the staff" (p. 42). This approach aligns with Murphy's (2005) contention that schools need to move beyond distributed leadership and develop a framework that builds on everyone's expertise in a more collaborative structure.

According to Hargreaves (2009), though, collaborative cultures should not devolve into a formulistic approach with a set pattern of steps designed to meet the specified targets; these steps include a prescribed process of analyzing data, establishing goals, and developing intervention plans. Trombly (2014) emphasized that the formal

leaders need to "refrain from imposing needless homogeny or inflexible plans upon their faculties" (p. 49). In essence, these authors expressed that collaborative relationships need to be authentic, rather than forced through a defined agenda.

The nature of the challenges facing educational institutions is creating urgency for developing new types of leadership and more collaborative cultures. These challenges are illustrative of adaptive problems, according to Heifietz and Linsky's (2002) definitions. They identified two types of problems: technical problems and adaptive problems. Technical problems are well-defined and can address technical expertise. In these cases, the solutions and their implementation are straightforward, and the outcomes of the problems are more predictable (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). Adaptive problems are not well-defined. They are complex and require multiple perspectives and dialogue. The solutions to adaptive problems require consideration of multiple perspectives, a steep learning curve among staff, and engagement in a cyclical problem-solving process. Moreover, the outcomes of adaptive problems are unpredictable (Heifetz et al., 2004). Adaptive problems require the stakeholders themselves to determine and implement the solution.

Owens (2004) postulated that the current issues facing education could, in fact, be characterized as adaptive problems. The type of leadership required to tackle adaptive problems is adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2004; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Owens, 2004). Adaptive challenges require exploring new solutions, from a number of perspectives, and implementing creative and innovative possible solutions co-created from this collaboration (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive leadership is highly collaborative and requires the commitment and engagement of multiple stakeholders. The goal of adaptive leadership is to energize and motivate leaders and followers through developing shared values and purposes (Owens, 2004). Adaptive leadership establishes structures that enable a diverse set of stakeholders to engage collaboratively in the exploration of an emergent problem (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). It moves the problem from formal authorities to the people closer to the issue and takes advantage of their insider perspective in developing solutions. Because most deep, adaptive changes require ownership and *buy in* from the stakeholders, adaptive leadership is most valuable in generating solutions (Randall, 2012). An adaptive leadership approach can set the foundation for the shared leadership and enable a shared power structure, both of which are necessary for developing a strong learning community guided by a community of leaders (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011).

Collaboration is a key element of adaptive leadership. Fullan (2008) believed that principals are in an ideal position to create enabling organizational structures for this model, including constructing collaborative work structures and climates. Marzano et al. (2005) examined school effectiveness and articulated 21 principal behaviors that were instrumental in school effectiveness. Most of these behaviors align with shaping the culture and the relationships among the internal and external stakeholders. They noted that principals need to create a purposeful community, "one with the collective efficacy and capability to develop and use assets to accomplish goals that matter to all community members through agreed-upon processes" (p. 99). Principals need to serve as role models in developing strong, collaborative relationships and intentionally engage others in building capacity to achieve their agreed-upon goals (Sackney &

Walker, 2006). As Hargreaves (2009) pointed out, though, the existence and success of collaborative cultures are heavily dependent on the support and guidance of school and district leadership.

In addition to collaborative cultures being context-specific, Mitchell and Sackney (2011) espoused that the success of school improvement initiatives is usually very dependent on school context and the skills of the leaders within those schools. However, the recent reform process in Ontario schools may suggest some positive practices that can contribute to successful widespread implementation of adaptive leadership models. Glaze (2013) posited that school divisions could promote school improvement by sharing successful teaching and learning strategies through a series of networks and by investing in the support and professional development of its people. Ontario's schools and its Ministry focused on capacity building by developing a series of local and provincial networks for sharing expertise, insight, and strategies and by investing in the development of people at all levels of the organization (Glaze, 2013). Glaze listed forums, symposiums, conferences, round tables, and regional meetings as types of constructed spaces for sharing knowledge, engaging in collective problem-solving, and outlining strategies for achieving outcomes focused on equity and improved student performance. Additionally, a wide array of professional development opportunities were established, including leadership development and instructional leadership training. By supporting personal efficacy within teachers and leaders, ministries of education can set the structures in place that support adaptive leadership development and widespread school improvement.

Conclusion

The complex challenges facing education require solutions generated by multiple stakeholders through collaborative processes. These collaborative cultures and collective efficacy in developing solutions, in turn, require adaptive leadership. Through intentional development of strong collaborative structures and processes, adaptive leaders move beyond distributive leadership toward a more efficacious leadership style needed to tackle the increasingly complex, adaptive problems in education.

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