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Understanding School Board Members' Perceptions of Superintendents' Leader Behaviors

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Abstract

The study of school leadership has been a topic of considerable investigation. Primarily, this literature has focused on the leadership of principals and superintendents. Although school boards work hand in hand with school leaders concerning the decision making functions of district business, a literature base specifically focused on school board members and their perceptions of school superintendents' leadership behavior is lacking. This paper provides a framework for understanding school board members' perceptions and suggests that school board members' views of superintendents' leadership behaviors may be influenced by demographic factors including years of experience and gender of board members.

Introduction

The relationship between a public school superintendent and his or her school board is critical. The board of education is responsible for hiring, evaluating, and compensating the superintendent. In turn, the superintendent is required to keep the board apprised of important operational and instructional issues within the district. Ideally, this relation is harmonious; board members and the superintendent work together making decisions, setting vision and mission, and solving problems, all with an eye toward district improvement and student learning. Unfortunately, this outcome is not common nor is it guaranteed.

Typically, central office staff is hired from the ranks of building leaders—elementary, middle and high school principals. From there, the path to the superintendent's office is most often through the district office; former assistant superintendents, curriculum directors and business managers all “move up” to take on the role. Certainly, these roles provide some of the necessary background knowledge and skills for success in a school district's highest office. However, personnel in these positions are often buffered from direct contact with school board members. It is often not until someone is hired into the position of superintendent that they are required to have direct and on-going contact with school board members (Houston & Eadie, 2005).

Recent research suggests that because of this buffering, numerous superintendents have never acquired the skills that will ensure a strong superintendent-board relationship (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Houston & Eadie, 2005). The result is often a dissatisfied, frustrated, and/or angry board (Houston & Eadie, 2005). These administrators, according to Houston and Eadie, had performed well in other administrative roles in the district, but these roles did not prepare them for the consistent interaction with board members required

by the position of superintendent. Of course, when the board chooses to hire these leaders they had full confidence in their abilities. Yet, as time and work progress, these initially rosy perceptions often sour, leaving board members disappointed and unsatisfied with the performance of the superintendent. Once displeased, it is often difficult for the board to remain confident in the school leader's abilities and effectiveness. In this way, board of education members' perceptions of their superintendent's leadership behavior are important and have the potential to affect a superintendent's efficacy.

Foundational to the discussion of school board and superintendent relations is the understanding of the ways in which school board members perceive a superintendent's behaviors and actions. Captured in the literature under the more general rubric of communication or public relations, school board members' perceptions of superintendent leadership behaviors have been under-represented in the literature of school leadership. The paper seeks not only to develop ideas related to school board perceptions of superintendent leadership actions and behaviors, but seeks to do so by comparing observed behaviors with those considered ideal.

Two general research questions guided the direction of the study. Are there significant differences in the perceptions of school board members regarding ideal leader behaviors (“what should be”) and the actual (real) leader behaviors (“what is”) of their school superintendents? Secondly, what are the factors that contribute to the differences in these perceptions; are these factors associated with demographics? To answer these questions, this study focuses on the following research objectives:

1. The development of understanding related to school board members perceptions of actual (real) and ideal superintendent behaviors, and;
2. The utility of the findings to aid in understanding organizational outcomes and performances.

Leadership in practice

Leadership as a social and educational phenomenon has been the subject of considerable attention in the literature of business, sociology, psychology, and education. Common to these studies is an attempt to define and type leader behaviors, characteristics, and actions (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002). There may be some difference in the specifics of a definition, but most authors conclude that leadership generally comprises *the exercise of intentional social influence through which members of a group are steered toward a goal through a process of structured activities, efforts, and individual or shared endeavors* (Bass, 1990; Bryman, 1986; Yukl, 2002). Foundational to thinking about leadership has been a concern for the production-focused work tasks in which leaders engage, as well as the people with whom they engage to perform these tasks.

The tandem theoretical constructs of consideration (people-related behavior) and initiation of structure (task-related behavior) have served to delineate the landscape of thinking about the work of leaders since the last century (Bass, 1999; Conger, 2004; Weick, 2001). Early research suggested that consideration addressed the social and emotional needs of organizational members, including recognition for their efforts, satisfaction with the work environment and task as well as other less tangible aspects of organizational culture and climate (Fleishman, 1973, 1995; Yukl, 2002). Research into those aspects of leadership thought to be initiating structures included leadership activities such as strategic planning and organizing, definition of work tasks and products, and evaluating individual and organizational progress toward goals (Fleishman, 1973, 1995; Tollerico, 1989; Yukl, 2002). The attention to these constructs as separate measures produced little in the way of concrete understandings concerning effective leadership, but when considered as associative and mutually informing notions they proved useful in the practical delineation of the disparate activities and actions of leaders. By considering these dual orientations of leadership behaviors, both employers and researchers began to consider the ways in which these two constructs interacted to create ideal organizational outcomes.

In considering the construct of initiating structures, research suggested the significance of the task as well as a leader's identification with the core functions of school improvement and progress (Gronn, 2003; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). When leaders focused their attentions on actions related to developing and implementing a vision, creating and adopting policy, practices and procedures for the day to day work of school and district personnel and monitoring and evaluating progress toward organizational goals it was thought that they were successfully contributing to the school and district goal attainment (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006;

Rowan, 2002; Spillane, 2006). However, research suggests that leaders, who only attend to the tasks of leadership, ignoring those with whom they work and rely, were less successful than leaders who thought about their charges in a more comprehensive manner (Kotter, 1995). In turn, those behaviors related to the well-being of the people who work within the district such as providing encouragement and recognition, communication of meaningful information in a timely and clear manner as well as openness and consultative behaviors, were considered critical for understanding leadership practices in schools and districts (Louis, 1994; Tollerico, 1989; Vechio, 2006).

What scant research exists concerning the topic of board members' perceptions of school superintendents' leader behaviors suggests that a positive board-superintendent relationship, including the board's ability to maintain a positive perception of the superintendent, is critical to the superintendent's effectiveness (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Harrington-Lueker, 2002; Hoyle & Skrla, 1999; Peterson & Short, 2001). This importance appears rational enough, given the fact that the board of education has authority to hire, fire, reward, renew contracts, and reinforce the work of the superintendent. Kowalski (1999) asserts that rapid turnover in the superintendency is often attributed to poor relationships between a superintendent and school board members. Dillon and Halliwell (1991) found that when superintendents' perceptions of his or her own purposes, strengths, and weaknesses were similar to those of board members, superintendents were more likely to be retained regardless of other performance data. Congruence in the perceptions is emphasized as a critical factor for ongoing superintendent effectiveness.

However, the literature on school board/superintendent relationships is lacking in empirical studies of the phenomena that contribute to the development of board perceptions of effectiveness. As has been discussed above, much of the prior work (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Harrington-Lueker, 2002; Hoyle & Skrla, 1999; Houston & Eadie, 2005; Peterson & Short, 2001) has focused on documenting that perception matters and that superintendents should take into account the perceptions of board members when considering their actions. It is important that research be completed that tease out the nuances that inform and form the perception forming process.

Methods

To address the gap in the literature, it was decided that an empirical study addressing the perceptions of superintendent effectiveness would be completed. Survey instruments were chosen for this study based on the study's focus of superintendents' leader behaviors from board members' perspectives. Prior work in this area has employed the *Leader Behavior*

Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) to measure two main constructs, Initiation of Structure and Consideration (Fleishman, 1995). In this research, consideration was defined as the degree to which a leader shows concern and respect for followers, looks out for their welfare, and expresses appreciation and support (Bass, 1990). In short, Consideration represents the people-skills of leader behavior. Initiating Structure, or Initiation of Structure, is the degree to which a leader defines and organizes the leader's personal role and the roles of followers, is oriented toward goal attainment, and establishes well-defined patterns and channels of communication (Fleishman, 1973, 1995). Initiation of Structure represents the production or task behavior of leadership. Consideration and Initiating Structure have been considered to be among the most robust of leadership concepts (Fleishman, 1995).

In keeping with the prior research on leadership behavior (Fleishman, 1995), this study used the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire-Form XII (LBDQ-Real), which measures perceptions of the actual behaviors observed in superintendent leadership behavior. The Ideal Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire-Form XII (LBDQ-Ideal), which measures those behaviors a board member would perceive as ideal leadership actions, and a Personal Data Sheet were also used for the collection of data in this study. The LBDQ-Form XII was developed by Stogdill (1963) and continually updated to account for changes of job role and vocabulary over time (Fleishman, 1995; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). The LBDQ—Form XII instruments set forth items that measure the perceptions of a leader's ability to attend to people within the district environment (known as the Consideration sub-scales) and his or her ability to attend to tasks within the district (known as the Initiating Structure sub-scales).

The two subscales of Consideration and Initiating Structure have been widely used in empirical research. Consideration and Initiating Structure have been considered to be among the most robust of leadership concepts (Fleishman, 1995). A meta-analysis of the relationship of Consideration and Initiating Structure with leadership provided support for the validity of these two subscale constructs in conducting further leadership research (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), revealing that both Consideration and Initiating Structure have main effects on numerous criteria noted in the leadership literature as fundamental indicators of effective leadership. Reliability of the LBDQ-Form XII appears relatively strong. Internal consistency coefficients were reported between .70 and .80, using a modified Kuder-Richardson formula (Stogdill, 1963).

The study specifically focused on the effects that the independent variables of gender, educational level, and years of experience of board members have on the dependent variables of board members' perceptions of superintendents'

leader behavior as measured on the LBDQ-Form XII subscales of Initiation of Structure and Consideration, both real and ideal. Additionally, the effects of the independent variables of gender and years of experience of superintendents on board members' perceptions of superintendents' leader behavior (dependent variable) were analyzed.

School board members from public school districts throughout a mid-western state were selected for the study. The following sampling procedures were utilized. School districts were divided into three categories: student enrollments below 2,000; student enrollments between 2,000 and 4,000; and student enrollments greater than 4,000. Following this non-proportional stratification, 50 districts from each category were randomly selected using the "sampling with replacement" method. Using this method permitted every district within each stratified population to be given an equal chance of being selected and therefore every possible sample within each category was equally probable. As the name of each school district was drawn from the population for the sample, the name of the district was then recorded and subsequently returned, guaranteeing that each school district had an equal chance for selection to the study. Individual school board members from each of the selected districts were provided an opportunity to participate in the study.

Data in this study were collected from school board members in public school districts, utilizing survey research specifically with self-administered questionnaires. The school board president from each of the selected school districts received by regular mail an initial letter of invitation and explanation, followed two weeks later with a reminder via email to the board president and superintendents encouraging participation, and then a packet of materials was mailed to each board president one week following the email reminder. One month following the mailing of packets, an email was sent to superintendents in all districts in which fewer than two responses had been completed and returned. Two weeks following this email, phone calls were made to districts in which there were no responses, for the same purpose of encouraging board members' participation in the study. The projected sample size was minimally 750 (3 categories by size, multiplied by 50 selected districts in each category, multiplied by at least 5 board members per school district). One hundred ninety-nine school board members completed and returned a survey for purposes of the research study that translated into a 27% response rate. Tables 1-3 provide demographic information of board members, superintendents, and school districts, respectively.

Findings

Two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized in the hypotheses that compare the mean scores

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants Analyzed

	Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Total	All respondents	199	100
Gender	Male	115	57.8
	Female	84	42.2
Service	≤ 2 years experience	56	28.1
	3-5 years experience	45	22.6
	6-9 years experience	53	26.6
	≥ 10 years experience	45	22.6
Ed. level	H.S. diploma	54	27.1
	B.A./B.S.	68	34.2
	Masters/Law	62	31.2
	Dr.	15	7.5

Table 2
Demographic Information of Superintendents

	Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	170	85.4
	Female	29	14.6
Service	≤ 2 years experience	70	35.2
	3-5 years experience	61	30.7
	6-9 years experience	35	17.5
	≥ 10 years experience	33	16.6

Table 3
Demographic Information of School Districts

	Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Type	Urban	29	14.6
	Suburban	96	48.2
	Rural	74	37.2
Size	< 2000	74	37.2
	2000-4000	55	27.6
	> 4000	70	35.2

for the interaction between the real and ideal dimensions of leader behaviors based upon the demographic variables of gender, educational level, and years of experience. A 2 (gender) x 4 (years of experience) x 4 (educational level) factorial design was used in examining the independent variables related to board members. A 2 (gender) x 4 (years of experience) factorial design was used in examining the independent variables related to superintendents. The use of MANOVA as the statistical procedure was determined as a result of examining the relationships of groups with two dependent variables (real and ideal scores on the subscales). The results of the study indicated that there were significant differences of superintendents' leader behavior in the perceptions of board members. These differences were observed specifically in the following three areas: there was a main effect of board members' experience on Real Initiation of Structure scores; there was an interaction effect of board members' gender, experience, and educational level on the Ideal Consideration scores; and there was a main effect of superintendents' experience on the Real Consideration scores.

The results indicate that the strongest conclusions from this study are that board members with a high level of experience may perceive their superintendents more positively than do those board members with a low level of board experience on the construct of Initiation of Structure. Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also conducted on each dependent variable significantly affected by independent variable(s) as a follow-up test to MANOVA. The significance level for ANOVA was set at .05 since when two dependent variables are analyzed, the overall significance level is to be divided by the number of dependent variables being tested (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005). ANOVA results indicate that the real score significantly differs for years of experience ($F(3, 169) = 3.545, p < .05$). Results also indicate that board members perceive their superintendent more positively on the construct of Consideration when a high level of superintendent experience exists. MANOVA results indicate that the main effect of experience (Pillai's Trace = .059, $F(6, 382) = 1.920, p < .10$) had a significant effect on the dependent variables of ideal and real scores of consideration.

Univariate ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc tests were conducted as follow-up analyses. The effect size was calculated to determine the magnitude of the difference between the groups (Cohen, 1988; Salkind, 2004). ANOVA results indicate that Real Consideration scores significantly differ for superintendent's experience ($F(3, 191) = 2.737, p < .05$), while the Ideal Consideration scores reveal no significant difference ($F(3, 191) = 1.503, p = .215$). Bonferroni post hoc tests for the Real Consideration score indicate that individuals with 3 to 5 years of experience differ significantly from those with 6 to 9 years of experience ($d = .5956$), and those with 6 to 9 years of experience differ significantly from those with 10 or more years ($d = .6927$).

Additionally, the data suggests that female board members hold higher expectations on the construct of Consideration and perceive superintendents' actual behavior lower on Consideration when compared with male board members. The test used for investigating the hypothesis was a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine the effect of gender, length of service, and educational level on the two dependent variables of participants' consideration scores on the LBDQ-Form XII both real and ideal.

Results indicated that the interactive effect of gender, experience, and educational level (independent variables) had significant differences on the dependent variables (Pillai's Trace = .122, $F(14, 338) = 1.569, p < .10$). Individual F tests were performed as a follow-up to MANOVA (Stevens, 1996) indicating significant interaction of board members' gender, experience, and educational level on the Ideal Consideration scores ($F = 2.571, p < .10$) and a significant effect of board members' experience on the Real Consideration score ($F = 2.497, p < .10$). Two-way profiles were analyzed as a follow-

up to the MANOVA (Stevens, 1996) to determine differences for the interaction effect of board members' gender, experience, and educational level on the dependent variable of ideal mean consideration scores.

Discussion

It is evident that the experience levels of both board members and superintendents have the potential to impact perceptions of board members in regards to superintendents' leader behaviors, both ideal and actual (measures as "real"). The data suggests that the more experience board members obtain, the more likely it is that board members will perceive their superintendent's actual leadership behaviors as positive. The finding holds for superintendent experience as well—that is, the more experienced superintendent (as measured in years in the position) is rated more positively than a less experienced superintendent. Evidence also suggests that gender plays a role in board members' expectations and perceptions of superintendents in the area of Consideration: female board members hold higher expectations, rating actual behavior lower than their male counterparts.

The current study extends the knowledge of superintendents' leader behavior as perceived by boards of education. It is evident by the results of this study that board members who have a high level of experience perceive the actual production (Real Initiation of Structure) of their superintendents as significantly higher than those board members with little experience. Additionally, superintendents with 10 years or more of experience are generally perceived more positively than those with less experience regarding their actual concern for people (Real Consideration). Board members who have 10 years or more of experience rate their superintendents higher in the area of Real Consideration.

These results indicate that as experience on the part of boards and/or superintendents grow, board of education members will view the superintendents' actual behavior more positively. The results also suggest that differences in gender account for variability in board perceptions. Female board members who responded to the survey generally hold higher expectations of superintendents in the area of consideration of people (Ideal Consideration) than do males, while the female board members tend to rate superintendents' Actual Consideration lower than do male board members. The results concerning gender provide the insight that female board members may hold higher expectations of superintendents' people skills, while generally rating the actual behavior as lower compared to male board members.

Implications

Several implications and practical applications are evident as a result of the findings of the study. The role that increased experience plays, both for superintendents and

boards of education, is evident, as well as some gender disparities. The following section discusses the theoretical and practical applications this research engenders.

Experience of Board Members

There is a stark contrast between the training required of superintendents as compared to that of board members. While superintendents generally either come to the position with several other administrative jobs or experiences in their past, any person can be elected to a board of education, and in most of the United States there is absolutely no training required once elected. Additionally, there remains a paucity of available training opportunities if a board of education member so desires such training. An individual may fill a seat on the board with little or no knowledge of the school district's mission, organizational programs, district financial condition, state funding laws, time commitment, governance responsibilities, and administrative and board roles and functions. This lack of knowledge often can be detrimental and may require a great deal of time to acquire the pertinent information necessary to make informed decisions. Moreover, the development of this knowledge base may take months or even years given that this kind of learning often occurs through a variety of real-life situations and a great deal of communication with more experienced board members and the superintendent.

Furthermore, depending on the experience of the board, the superintendent often is placed in the potentially awkward position of training the very board members who will in turn evaluate that same superintendent. As noted in the literature, a school superintendent is placed in a unique employment condition (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005), being hired by, reporting to, and evaluated by the collective group known as the school board. Superintendents often paradoxically spend much of their time in discussion with inexperienced board members assisting them in understanding the roles and functions of boards. This "training" of inexperienced board members usually requires prolonged and conscientious attention, and the superintendent is usually held responsible for this development (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005; Houston & Eadie, 2005).

Related to issues of the experience of board members is a tension that inexperienced board members often do not grasp—that of supporting and governing. In the role of support for the district, board members attempt to ensure the success of the school district, by placing tax issues on the ballot, acting as ambassadors of the organization, and often bringing some level of specific expertise and authority to the district. Delegating to the superintendent responsibility for day-to-day administration of the district, and then acting on the superintendent's recommendations are acts of support. The board also can be supportive by developing a clear job description and setting unmistakable performance expectations of the superintendent.

The governance function of the board includes protecting the public interest through selecting the superintendent and treasurer, assessing the performance of these two individuals, setting policy that ensures quality education, and evaluating the district's work. Additionally, maintaining fiscal responsibility, monitoring progress of the strategic plan, and providing oversight for the district's goals are acts of governance. Inexperienced board members often mistake governance for close supervision and end up meddling in minor administrative affairs. Due to their lack of familiarity with the field of education, such meddling can become burdensome for district office personnel and potentially damaging for long-term working relationships. Superintendents and board members would be wise to remember that lack of experience may result in less positive perceptions of the superintendent, and may result in a strained rapport, connections, and associations between the board of education and superintendent. Information from this study can be helpful to both superintendents and board members as they reflect on their relationships in terms of actual leader behavior. Additionally, results lead to the conclusion that there is a tremendous need for board development programs, as well as joint training for both superintendents and boards regarding the roles and functions of each.

Gender of Board Members

The role that gender plays in the expected and actual behavior of superintendents is both interesting, and potentially important, especially when combined with the fact that there remains a scarcity of female superintendents (15% in the current study), while there is more balance with board members (42% are females in the study). These percentages are congruent with those across the state in which the study was completed, with 18% of state superintendents being female, while 33% of state board members are female. This difference in expectations and actual behavior was noticed in the area of Consideration in the current study and may be important for superintendents to clarify expectations in this area to avoid potential conflict with their boards. The possibility exists that there are some inherent problems of understanding the expectations in the area of consideration of people. Perhaps male superintendents tend to be more focused on task and production issues, whereas many board members are focused on people skills of their superintendent. Further, female board members may communicate their expectations differently than do male board members (Borisoff & Merrill, 1985) to primarily male superintendents. In any case, it is a prudent step for a superintendent to seek clarity of expectations from the board of education in this area, especially given the fact that a superintendent's tenure demands that expectations of the board are satisfied (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005).

Communication

Results of the study indicate several points of consideration in the area of communication (note: communication skills and behaviors are measured within both the consideration and initiation of structure sub-scales). Communication must be timely, consistent, and attentive to the needs and expectations of both the board members and the superintendent (Rickabaugh & Kremer, 1997). Communication is critical to an effective, positive perception. The results of this study indicate that more time may be needed in the area of communication with female board members or those who are relatively inexperienced as board members. Awareness of the results of this study may influence the manner in which one communicates with experienced versus non-experienced board members, males versus females.

When communicating with boards of education, experience and observation suggest that practical behaviors on the part of superintendents may enhance the relationship with members of the board. While it may be tempting to emulate and copy another's style, the nature of frequent and often detailed communication with board members should dictate the fact that it is vital to be yourself or one runs the risk of being inconsistent and being perceived as insincere. A second important behavior is to be credible and honest in communication. Superintendents can get themselves into trouble with their boards when attempting to answer every question and appear knowledgeable in every conceivable manner. It is more important to be able to back any statements or answers with factual information, and this often includes going to others for information prior to answering questions. In this way, leaders are more likely to be perceived as effective.

Conclusions

An abundance of prior research has focused and built upon studies of leader behaviors that include a task or production orientation, and one of interaction with people or consideration (Vechio, 2006). These two constructs have been formally defined as Initiation of Structure and Consideration and are measured on the LBDQ as separate subscales and were utilized within this study. In practice, application of these theoretical constructs is evidenced when superintendents and boards work together, addressing the concerns and issues their district faces. During these interactions, public school board members form perceptions of their superintendents, at least in part, based upon superintendents' exhibited behaviors, and these perceptions are critical to the board-superintendent relationship. Boards typically desire a superintendent who is able to "produce results" for the district (e.g.: high state report card scores, increased graduation rates, fiscally responsible management, and other task-related behaviors). Additionally, boards yearn for a superintendent who pays attention to people as individuals, forms positive relationships with parents and community members, and

generally works cooperatively with others. As a result of investigating these expectations and perceived behaviors that board members hold, both board members and superintendents have an opportunity for increased understanding and practice of their working relationship.

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