

Transforming Leaders, Creating Communities: Changing Schools Through Transformative Leadership

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Gause, C. P. (2003). Transforming leaders, creating communities: changing schools through transformative leadership, *Commentary*-Miami University, Department of Educational Leadership-Electronic Journal: Initiative Anthology. <http://www.units.muohio.edu/eduleadership/anthology/RCI/COM03002.html>

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Abstract:

When the culture of the school presents a barrier to resolving its many problems, we must become proactive transformational leaders. Such a role involves understanding the schools culture and transforming custodial organizations into creative learning communities. Such changes require a transformational leadership that is creative, courageous, and visionary.

Article:

If you think this article is about accountability and high stakes testing, think again. School administrators, superintendents, counselors, teachers, and public officials in the United States are concerned with accountability to state mandates, yes, but more so with the struggle of being accountable to the citizens of their states despite many challenges. Though the new millennium arrived with great economic prosperity, it brought with it all the old problems of power, race, identity, violence, and ethics. But the new millennium also brought new challenges for educators: 1) the increase number of charter schools; 2) voucher programs; 3) home schooling; and, 4) for profit educational organizations. All of these entities in some shape or form compete for already limited educational funding sources that historically have been reserved for Americas public schools. The national economic downturn, the last wave of horrific budget cuts, the present political climate are adding to the hurdles for educators, particularly administrators, who must successfully educate our students with less than adequate resources. And these resources are not just monetary but human as well.

Other kinds of changes are taking place. The meaning and purpose of schooling is being redefined. The relationship between teachers and students has entered into a critical stage of re-negotiating what and whose knowledge is of greater value. And we address these issues in a time when the world around our schools is changing dramatically. We are educating in a time of an expanding globalization whose impact we witness via twenty-four-hour news broadcasts. Our world is changing rapidly but are our schools keeping up with this global transformation? In addressing these issues, the leadership (including teachers) of K-12 educational organizations and school districts must recognize that schooling is a political act that occurs in the context of the cultural politics of race, class, and gender (Gause 2001). Further, educational leaders need to search diligently for the discrepancies that exist between what is and what should be.

As a principal in the rural areas of Williamsburg County, I constantly questioned how I could be more effective in providing leadership which would implement district policies, state mandates, and national standards, but without all of the bureaucracy. It was indeed a struggle. I knew I needed to understand the culture of the school and climate; I also knew that I needed to make decisions. I involved my staff in the decision-making process. However, I realized that because of the culture the faculty and staff at the time did not believe they should be involved in the decision-making process. With this realization came an epiphany. In order to successfully educate every student, I had to orchestrate a plan to do so which included the transformation of the culture of the school. It would require a transformation in the ways the faculty and staff viewed their roles as educators. In formulating this plan, I became a proactive transformational leader who espoused creativity. This required the ability to identify and unite all stakeholders in the educational process which is truly the essence of leadership through unity.

Schooling, Culture, and Reform

The struggle in delivering successful academic programs involves negotiating two sets of goals. First, students should be the primary focus of schools. But are they? Teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, building administrators, and hall monitors should have as their foci student development. This concern consists of emotional, mental, cognitive, and social paradigms. Secondly, the schooling process should be designed to deliver instruction and knowledge to prepare a citizenry who will perpetuate notions of democracy. Does this happen?

To realize these goals it is crucial that we understand the schools culture. But what is culture? It is a shared reality constructed over time. It is moving and dynamic. Culture includes both past and present perceptions; and its perceived reality is reflected in its symbols, rituals, and purpose. The schools culture is a representation of what its members collectively believe themselves to be; it is their self-concept. The schools culture reflects what the stakeholders value and what they express to others as being important around here. In order for school reform to occur educators must realize that the culture of the school and the way the school operates must be transformed inside and out, not only physically but mentally. One of the major problems with school restructuring has been the disproportionate focus on the technical issues of school management such as block scheduling, student housing, and academic coordination. In order for schools to be restructured effectively, however, educators must focus not just on how the building operates or on the delivery of instruction, but on the content and purpose of schooling.

Organizations are socially constructed realities that exist in the minds of their collective members as well as in the concrete sets of rules and regulations that those members develop. According to those rules and roles, educators are, indeed, accountable for the dissemination of knowledge. But they are accountable first and foremost for the advancement of the

human spirit! It is important to make organizations effective; it is important, as well, to foster humane social conditions. Remember: we need leaders who will respond to knowledge in ways that will benefit not only the organization and its members, but the social order as well.

Creative Learning Communities versus Custodial Organizations

Creating the kind of organization that is responsive to the concerns of both professionalism and social justice often means transforming schools into creative learning communities. Such institutions seek variations in routines, unlike custodial organizations. Creative learning communities ignore rules; they seek to develop procedures for encouraging desirable behavior versus establishing levels of discipline and punishment. These communities also look for innovations in providing optimal learning experiences for their stakeholders. Creative learning communities remain on the cutting edge and they do this by establishing new missions, thriving on unpredictability and broadening their scope for new horizons. They avoid the mechanization, simplification, and predictability found in custodial organizations. Creative learning communities encourage their members to critique and question the present state of the community. While they seek alternative answers and means to securing financial, material, and human resources to provide optimal learning experiences for all stakeholders, they do so in accordance with district and state mandates. Schools which are creative learning communities utilize testing and measurement data to design programs which allow their students to excel. The facility is often considered as a learning laboratory or learning community instead of a school.

Proactive Leaders

Transforming a custodial school into creative learning community is a collective effort but it requires proactive leaders. Such leaders must not submit to external pressures by perpetuating an existing social order. Proactive leaders know that change is inevitable and necessary to success. Proactive leaders are courageous and understand that how leaders function within a changing world will determine the success of their students and their learning community. Courageous leaders must view their schools as part of a larger whole and facilitate patterns of change and development that will allow their identity to evolve along with the wider system (Daresh, 2001).

Creative Leadership

Proactive leaders seeking to turn their schools into creative learning communities are also creative leaders. The building administrator of a creative learning community is a visionary and viewed by the community as a creative educational leader. Creative leaders take risks. They have the capacity to empathize and sustain a personal commitment to the learning

community. The creative educational leader develops the goals of the community from an inward desire to improve and create educational opportunities for all regardless of students situations. They seek ways around the bureaucracy. Creative leaders are not polarized in their thinking processes but incorporate both conceptual and analytical processes in a complementary fashion. Creative leaders understand that creativity grows out of an interest in discovery and so they foster awareness and curiosity.

Creative leadership is the ability to bring about constructive change within organizations. This type of leadership is innovative and demands a capacity to conceptualize new avenues for change. The creative leader must have the following abilities: 1) the ability to determine a course of action; 2) the ability to persuade others; 3) the ability to be self-empowered; and, 4) the ability to be self-motivated. Such a leader is not only self-empowered but is an expert at setting the climate for the empowerment of all organizational members through the full utilization of their unique abilities and skills.

Finally, the creative leader must believe in transformational leadership. Transformational leadership lives in the heart of the creative leader. Transformational leadership is the art of institution building, the reworking of human and technological materials to fashion an organism that embodies new and enduring values. Transformational leadership is leadership that both inspires and transforms others to become more conscious of the human condition. It is oriented toward social vision and change, not simply, or only, organizational goals. In conclusion, as a creative educational leader, I understand that it is my duty and responsibility to encourage other human beings, particularly those who are involved in the educational process, to transform our environment, institutions, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where those in which we come in contact will become agents of democracy and social justice. Together we must face the struggle of educating our citizenry with nobility and commitment. For together in the struggle we are one.

References

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