HARMONIZING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY, MICRO-POLITICS AND SCHOOL CULTURE FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT- A THEORETICAL STANCE

Dr. Chryselda Caesar

Organizational Improvement and Performance Management Consultant
E- lecturer University of the West Indies
chryseldacaesar@yahoo.co.uk, Contact telephone 1758 717 3068

Abstract. Building Leadership capacity an essential variable for school improvement, informs the quest for expanding knowledge through collaborative learning to impact the quality of learning and teaching in schools. Constructing and negotiating fresh meaning by continuously challenging theoretical and practical models of operation, and revisiting our most sacred beliefs are healthy for fashioning a collaborative work environment with shared sense of community and unified purpose. This study argues from a theoretical standpoint for the harmonization of building leadership capacity, micro-politics and school culture. As we continue to probe and de-construct in the pursuit for new insights of the leadership challenge, these pivotal cornerstones for school improvement may add to the complex mosaic of school leadership.

Key words: school leadership, capacity building, school culture, micro politics, Caribbean, small island states.

1 INTRODUCTION

All leaders need assistance and support, but some may need more than others to build capacity to lead successful schools that focus on the delivering of quality education. Building capacity involves the synergy of resources, structures, culture and skills for school improvement. It requires leaders who understand the connectedness; leaders with the required skills to manage school processes, to produce greater competencies and capabilities among their staff, and overall capacity within the organization. Capacity building encompasses not simply shifting cultures and changing structures or developing certain skills, but managing the complex ebbs and flows of these developments (Hadfield, 2003, a). Hopkins et al. (2003) indicated that the following four collective competencies are necessary to bring about change in schools.

- Knowledge, skills, disposition of individual staff.
- Technical resource.
- Collaborative work-professional learning community.
- Programme coherence based on clear learning goals.

2 EXPAND ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE- BUILDING CAPACITY IN SCHOOLS

School leaders that are committed to the delivery of quality education require knowledge, skills, right thinking, and right action to cope with the complexity, continuous change and

turbulent environments of schools. People in schools should engage in continuous process of learning, and schools should become learning organizations (Garratt, 1994). The clarion call is for collective learning, capitalizing on shared knowledge, skills and talents to realize shared goals and common vision.

Drucker (1993) discusses the relevance of the knowledge worker and the application of knowledge as a requirement of all organizations. Fullan (2003 a) supports the notion that principals and school leaders with newly acquired knowledge are positioned to influence, but more importantly they are equipped with the knowledge to guide the quality of teaching within their organizations.

2.1 Schools as learning organizations:

Hargreaves A. (2003, p.184) outlines a process for schools that are interested in the pursuit of developing capacity for learning. He states 'if schools were learning organizations, they would develop structures and processes that enable them to learn and respond quickly to their unpredictable and changing environments. They would operate as genuine communities that draw on collective power and human resources to pursue continuous improvement'. Three characteristics of schools that operate as professional learning communities include:

1. Engagement in collaborative work.
2. A focus on teaching and learning issues within a collaborative work environment.
3. Assessment and data gathering for evaluating progress, and for identifying problems.

3 BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH COLLABORATION: MICRO-POLITICS

Gaining expertise knowledge by becoming learning organizations is not enough to guarantee commitment and participation for advancing the school's goals that are directed towards the delivery of quality schooling. It may require expert power to influence organizational change to accomplish this task (Hoy and Miskell, 2001) which brings to the surface micro-politics.

According to Blasé &Anderson (1995, p.1) 'micro-politics is about power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want'. School environment constitutes several realities, levels of control and conflict, affiliations, leadership styles. At times schools function as though they are participative and democratic. During staff meetings teachers are invited to make policy decisions. However at other times schools are bureaucratic and oligarchic, and decisions are made with no teacher involvement or consultation (Ball,1993).

It appears that leaders may seek to employ different political strategies based on leadership styles or combination of styles to advance their schools' goals. Blase and Anderson (1995) distinguish between open and close styles of leadership, which either facilitate or impede growth. Open leaders tend to be facilitative, democratic, empowering or cultural. These leaders employ 'power for purpose' (Hoy and Miskel 2001, p. 217) to move organizational goals. They demonstrate a tendency to use less reactive and more diplomatic strategies to create increased opportunities and participation in a professional and humane school climate.

On the other hand close leaders maybe adversarial, authoritarian, dictatorial, bureaucratic and transactional. They employ contractual rewards to advance either individual or organizational goals. Often the overall purpose of school may be distorted amidst the politics of bargaining or control or manipulation (Hoy and Miskel 2001) if leaders are not astutely tuned to the overall goals for quality education.

3.1 Power and Politics in Schools

Power and Politics are realities of organizational life and often viewed as the dark side of organizations (Hoyle, 1982). Organizational politics, an element of school culture, is closely linked to capacity building which requires leaders to look holistically at each area of their school but more importantly to develop an understanding, and generate action to bring each of these parts together in a synergistic fashion to generate greater capacity (Hadfield, 2003 b). Once these parts are brought together, schools need to find ways to generate a unity of purpose and to sustain commitment to achieve the identified goals. Transactional leaders achieve their motives and desired purpose by fulfilling or satisfying the motives of followers through rewards and incentives (Robinson, 2001). They employ micro politics within the school environment to achieve the preferred outcomes. Peeke (2003) argues that the strength of transactional leadership is dependent on the bargaining skills of the leader, and some leaders are more capable in utilizing this capacity than others.

4 CREATING A COLLABORATIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT: A SCHOOL CULTURE THAT ENHANCES CAPACITY WITHIN SCHOOLS

School leaders interact and work with people from diverse backgrounds with different belief systems, values and perceptions. Developing shared understanding and unity of purpose maybe a challenge endeavor, but nonetheless a worthwhile undertaking to create community and sustain commitment to schools goals. Cultural collegiality where people can commit to a greater purpose other than their own self-interest (Handy and Atkins, 1990, p.143) is a powerful force for creating changes in schools.

Daft (1999) defines culture as a pattern of shared assumptions about how things are done in an organization. It serves two main functions: it helps to integrate people in an organization and to assist organizations to adapt to change. Implying that shared leadership is preferred for building commitment and change within organizations. Harris (2003) brings to the fore the element of micro politics in school culture by alluding that leaders do not only manage culture but they purposely impact upon the school culture in order to change it.

4.1 Leadership behavior and school culture

Leithwood et al.(1999) provides this list of leadership behaviour and activities that can impact on school culture:

1. goal consensus and vision building through participation
2. professional development and support
3. supporting staff practices and values which reflect school's vision and goals
4. sharing of decision making process, building capacity, create environment for problem solving
5. recognizes norms and sustains clarify and reinforce beliefs and values

Leaders use ceremonies, stories, symbols, specialize language, daily activities, situation and socialization i.e. they carefully select and recruit staff as well as socialize new employees into the beliefs systems to promote culture (Daft, 1999). These activities are important to create both a connectedness and a sense of community in schools (Hadfield, 2003 a). Leaders may employ persuasion and coercion; elements of micro politics to protect and reinforce the school culture.

Daft (1999), mentions four cultural categories- organizations may fall into one or all of the categories as shown in table 1. However, organizations with a strong culture may lean more towards one of them.

Table 1
Cultural Categories (Daft, 1999)

Cultural styles	Features
Adaptability	Strategic leaders, shared decision making, risk-taking, entrepreneurship, open atmosphere of challenge and discussion
Achievement	Leaders focuses on achievement, result oriented, collective winning
Clan	Leader focuses Participatory and involvement, cooperation, friendly, fairness
Bureaucratic	Leader strives for consistency and stability, methodology, rules, inflexible

Hargreaves (1994) proposes a similar set of four styles which provide a framework for understanding the relationship between leadership styles and culture: Formal -performance driven; Hothouse- everyone participates; Welfarist - relaxed friendly and Survivalist- maintenance. Culture serves as a vital linkage mechanism for creating coherence and commitment. Understanding and application may enable re-culturing, restructuring and re-skilling to generate capacity at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational level to building capacity for school improvement (Hadfield, 2003 a), and for achieving quality education in small states. However (Hoy and Miskel, 2001) argue that culture change is a long and tedious journey and there is no simple or quick process for changing it.

5 LEADERSHIP REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Building capacity for educational reform and change requires understanding the context of school environment in small states. It should be integrated in school's goals and policy, and agreed upon by all members of the school community. It may require structuring, redirecting and resourcing to develop a community of learners (Fullan, 1993). Closed leaders or the authoritarian style of leading that appears to prevalent in the third world (Harber and Davis (2002) will be challenged more so in an environment that requires a common vision, collaborating professional support, engagement in problem diagnosis, resolving conflicts and working within a collaborative culture. Otherwise, collective learning, a major contributor to

organizational change, with people working in a collaborative environment will not materialize to transform schools into learning organizations. The call for open leaders who are better prepared to adapt, create and develop new strategies to respond productively to school reform appears to be critical at this stage for small developing states. The guidelines provided by Hargreaves (2003) and Stoll et al. (2002) which included: assessing and working within school context; supporting colleagues as they engage in acquiring creating and using knowledge; developing supportive culture and structures; employing system and collective thinking; bridging and building communities may be helpful strategies that school leaders can employ to create learning communities.

Leaders may need to bridge communities by managing micro politics and accepting the diversity and differences of ideas, and secondly respecting the ideas that reside within the school community. Good leaders entertain and use politics as a craft to channel the rich and challenging ideas to advance school goals. They may need to entertain and encourage critique as poor management of ideas or the voice dissent, if not adequately managed may lead to chaos and purposelessness in schools.

Purposeful leaders build communities by focusing on the cultural environment in which people interact in order to sustain or change them through participation and involvement. Culture building involves supporting and developing "behaviours that promotes school norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that are studied with context" (Harris 2003) to promote quality schools. Culture embodies the intangible, the informal, and the unconscious way school is conducted. In the words of Deal (1988, p. 202) 'it consists of patterns of thoughts, behaviour, and artifacts that symbolize and give meaning to the work place'. Meaning is obtained through shared values and beliefs, heroes and heroines, rituals, ceremonies, stories, in an informal network of cultural players. Hoy and Miskel (2001) discouraged the transplanting of cultural models into schools because each school is unique, and each school exists in its own fluid amorphous environment. More so with the diverse social interactions that create sub cultures within the school, leaders need to be alert, as diverse sub-cultures may emerge to either undermine or play a positive role in school performance (Deal 1988).

6 CULTURAL SPECIFICITY AND TRANSFERABILITY OF LEADERSHIP MODELS IN SMALL STATES:

The behaviour demonstrated by individuals is influenced by the environment more so by their cultural settings. Hence, the theoretical leadership models, as well as those that emerged from empirical research undertaken in organizations in the developed world may not be easily transferable to small states. In addition a contextual view of learning and thinking with greater emphasis on the internal and external influences is required in researching leadership models and practices for developing countries and others (Begley, 2002).

With respect to the applicability of leadership concepts, small islands are not unique if they attempt to borrow some of the concepts and theories that are developed in and for developed countries. Harber and Davis (2002) explain that such theories are often inadequate to the third world realities and though this awareness exists from experience we still apply it hoping it will work this time.   However it might be useful to consider the following key issues before engaging or developing school leaders for quality schools:

1. The contextual framework of the school.

2. Leadership styles that focus on results.

3. Building capacities within schools.

7 A CASE FOR A DIFFERENT MODEL OF LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOLS IN SMALL ISLAND STATES

Leadership concepts are changing and evolving to keep paste with societal changes and school reform demands. The traditional leadership or formal models reflect the concepts that schools are structured like corporate organizations in that they were linear, goal specificity, and operated in controlled and stable environments. The performance deficiencies and ineffectiveness go far beyond unsatisfactory examination results. The challenges to equip people with the knowledge and skills to survive in a complex social, economic and technological society demand a new perspective of schools led by creative and attentive leadership.

However the choice and suitability of leadership resides in its applicability and relevance to the contextual situations of schools. The application and validity of leadership theories are questionable particularly for small states with different cultural background, different social perceptions and expectations, limited resources, organizational capacity and structures. While drawing on outside experiences and theories from developed countries with due attention to their cultural and contextual development, perhaps small island states need to examine the generic concepts and practices of leadership to arrive at theories that produces results within their context. Though new theories of leadership may be the desired ideal, successful schools require sound leadership and management. Fullan's (2003 a) notion of leadership as an improvisational art further stresses its fluidity, amorphous and indefinable nature as well as the level of difficulty and intensity of the challenge for school leaders. One may ask which leadership model is appropriate for leading schools in small states? It appears that there is no one right model for school leadership. However leadership that focuses on results with due attention to context is a plausible way forward.

Perhaps the four concepts that underpin good leadership proposed by Bolam and Deal (1991) are relevant in the synthesis of a leadership model proposed for small island states.

These four frames are itemized below.

- Structural leaders: value analysis of data, set clear goals, hold people accountable for results, solve problems, they value structures, rationality, efficiency and policies.

- Human Resource leader: value interactions and relationships and feelings and lead through facilitation and empowerment

- Cultural leader create a social construct by pay attention to myths, rituals, stories ceremonies, and relevant symbolic forms.

- Political leader: advocates, negotiates, network, create coalitions, comprise and build power base.

(Adapted from Bolam and Deal, 1991)

The proposed leadership for small states is outlined below as figure 1.

Figure 1. An ATTENTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP Model for Small States
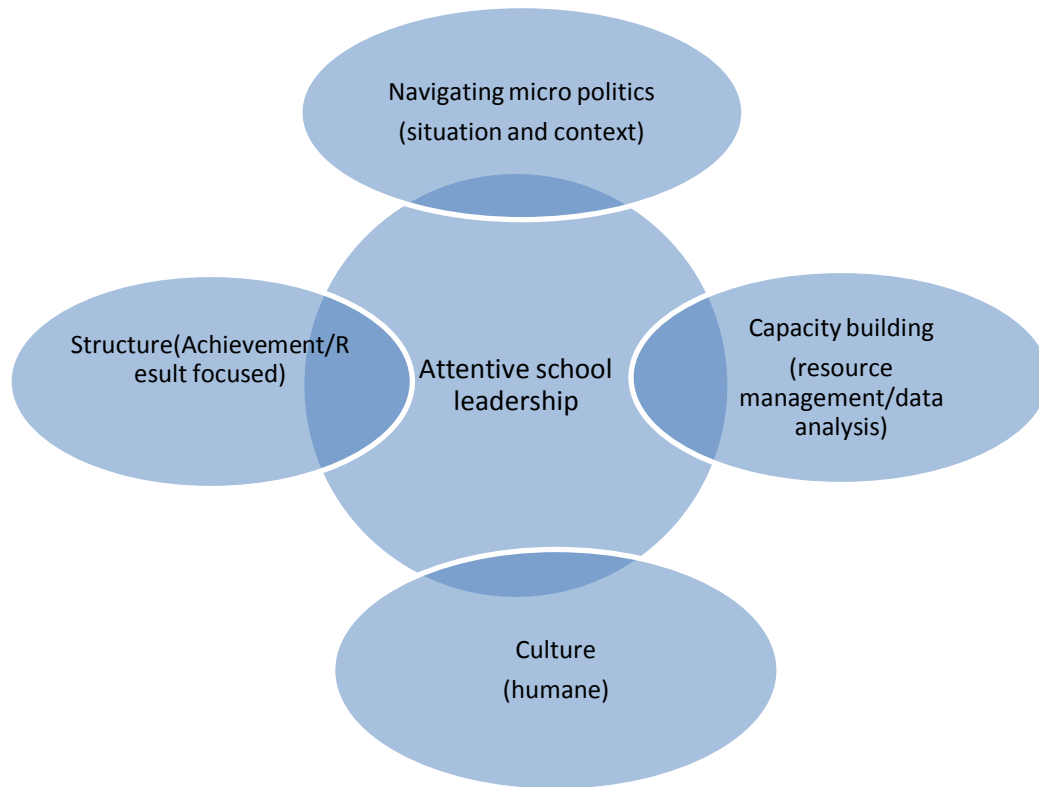
School models proposed by Leithwood et al. (1999), Cheng (1994) and Sergiovanni (1992) also reflect the four core concepts identified above by Bolam and Deal (1991). In addition the behaviour and ways of working in small islands are underpinned by a unique culture and the influence of politics at both macro and micro level. The relevance of the humane way of leading is even more relevant in small states because of the family bonds, friendship and connectedness that exist in small villages and towns.

 The inclusion of building capacity and resource management in the leadership model for small states is imperative. The prevailing understand is that schools in small developing states are the corner stones for social and economic reform, and, developing countries are expected to produce more learning with less resources to make the transition from shallow to resilience and profound learning. Structure provides leaders with an organized and systematic framework for effective implementation of activities that may support quality schools. This

model also combined the concept from Hoy and Miskel (2001) of the significance of situations and context due to the inimitability of village schools in small states.

Conclusion

Leaders who embark on changing and creating quality schools need all the support and recourses available for this process. Perhaps the impetus should be on building capacity by increasing and managing knowledge, valuing diversity of thinking by embracing micro politics, appreciating the human resource, creating and sustaining a culture conducive to excellence. Building capacity should be purposive and directed to creating quality schools and for the delivery of quality education for all. They should be purposely attentive in the meandering journey of leadership.

However leaders can build capacity to create successful schools only if they possess the capacity within themselves to do so. Otherwise the learning gap will continue to widen. Bauman (1998) identifies this dilemma of third world people explaining that this trend will continue and remain causing third world island people to experience a negative global trend that fixate them to a confined locality (cited in Moos 2002, P.364), unless schools and supporting personnel   engage in meaningful learning to bridge the knowledge divide that exit in the third world.

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