RESEARCH PAPERS

USING EFFECTIVE LISTENING, NEGOTIATING, AND REFLECTING TO PROMOTE CONSTRUCTIVE SCHOOL COLLABORATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

By

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous reasons why human connectivity fails in contemporary United States K-12 school districts ranging from overlooking faculty contribution to disregarding their individualism. Often, the need to fill mandates supersedes the bond between school leaders and faculty, and faculty to students. Leadership must be a collective effort, as one individual cannot have all the capabilities, knowledge, and resources to work alone. It is defined therefore as a malleable concept: connecting actions to ideas; it fails in isolation. The objectives of this literature-based study are to investigate how school leaders delegate effectively to faculty, as well as contribute productively to a district's goals. Three benchmarks of effective listening, negotiating, and reflecting promoted constructive leadership within a school environment. Behavioral errors of listening and negotiating prompted a need to find solutions. These solutions are, (a) examining errors within the aforementioned behavioral criteria, (b) precipitating the solution of story-telling, (c) collaborating work efforts, and (d) maintaining a reflection log. However, further research is needed to assess why there are stronger individual efforts within collaborative work projects.

Keywords: Collaborative Work Effort, Listening, Negotiating, Reflecting, School Administrator Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In school districts in the United States, human connectedness to each other should be a priority. However so often, faculty's group contribution can be overlooked. Most often due to various mandates on the local, state, and federal levels in any educational setting, leadership takes on a collective effort, as an individual may not be able to work alone with accruing and dispensing resources. Leadership is a concept that flexes and changes. Its efforts do not work well in isolation (Hulpia and Devos, 2009; Zacko-Smith, 2007; Zyngier, 2007).

The following study is a theoretical, literature-based assessment of how stakeholders in a school district use the concepts of effective listening, negotiating, and reflecting connected to constructive leadership. There were behavioral errors found in listening and negotiating. Within

the setting of a large group meeting, three benchmarks of listening, negotiating, and reflecting prompted four solutions. They were, (a) examining errors within behavioral criteria, (b) precipitating the solutions of story-telling, (c) collaborative work effort, and (d) maintaining a reflection log.

1. Errors in Effective Listening

Listening effectively was difficult to accomplish when speech dominates in most situations. There are various scenarios that distracted individuals from listening well: formulating a rebuttal, or pondering incongruous topics (Block, 2009). Listening must be connected to the speaker's thoughts, in order to minimize cynicism and confusion of the listeners (Soholt, 2007). On a linguistic level, the speaker's problems of *elision* or *intrusion* may hinder the listener's attention. Elision was denoted as the omission of

vowels, sounds, or syllables in speech. For example, *we are* became *we're; library* became *lib(a)ry, sandwich* became *san(d)wich*. As the speaker attempted informal language with the audience, often words had a shortened or muffled element to their diction (Puschmann, 2009). Conversely, intrusion added sounds in between two vowels, in order to make the transition smoother. For example, sea otter became sea (y)otter. Regardless of the speaker's variance in diction that encumbered an audience's "effective" listening, there were other criteria involved: misaligned measurement of evaluation tools, or the understanding of the listener's perception toward the speaker (Puschmann, 2009).

1.1 Solutions in Effective Listening: Story-Listening

Effective listening solutions offered an opportune dialogue between faculty and school leaders. Within story-listening as a group activity, criteria included attention to verbal and non-verbal signals, silence, and empathy. Effective listening was a continual commitment from the listener, while making it difficult to sustain (Shipley, 2010). First, it was important to divide the large group into smaller groups in order to have the most leverage during the listening task. Small groups were defined as less than 20 people. Also, the efficiency of small groups (four members ideally) self-corrected errors in an easier fashion than in larger groups (Block, 2009).

A listening activity began when one group member read aloud a passage to the other three. The others listened once without any notations. Next, the three group members recorded their ideas into four subset categories (see Appendix I), namely *Gist, Specific Information, Detail,* and *Inferential* (Hosseini, 2009). Within this paradigm, one group member read a short passage on the benefits of block scheduling at the high school. Under the Gist category, listeners determined only the speaker's broad stance, while assessing if the points-of-view supported or refuted block scheduling. Under the Specific Information category, listeners determined all applicable data for a new scheduling system. For example, how have courses or lunch periods shifted because of this new schedule? Under the Details category, group listeners assessed the more finite reasons for implementing this new daily schedule: bus runs, sports schedules, extra-curricular assignments, etc. In

the final Inferential category, listeners demarcated extraneous influences on the issue, e.g., what were the community and parental opinions of block scheduling?; how were community groups affected by this new schedule? (gymnasium or swimming pool usage); and what union issues arose from this new block scheduling? (Hosseini, 2009).

Story-listening was a powerful way to combine meaning, current issues, emotion, sense of experience, purpose, and direction. Stories evoked cognitive powers of analysis, problem solving, and setting and achieving objectives. Active-listening constituted also as comprehension of other's insight via vocalization (Glickman et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). Cognitively, individuals were predisposed to five key elements of story listening. These five areas were used within a listening exercise, in order to build strength in active listening and recall. Faculty developed a listening plan regarding block scheduling connecting ideas through the use of character, intent, actions, struggles, and details (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

After one group member read the passage about not wanting to implement this new schedule change, the others designed new characters within a story frame. This included characters taken from the district setting: Guidance Department, students, parents, and school leaders. In the Intent category, listeners ascertained the goals and motives of these characters (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). Were students who used off-site educational services and classes having problems with transportation because of this new schedule? Within the Actions category, what were these newly-designed characters doing to solve their problems? The group listeners comprised other scenarios that worked well in other districts, while highlighting implementation of these new solutions.

In the Struggles category, the character within the story passage attempted to achieve goals despite obstacles. Here, the faculty in the listening group assessed the internal and external barriers to block scheduling. The former suggested obstacles found within the internal conflict of the character. For example, a teacher may not have the tools to plan for longer lessons with neither experience nor

training. The latter expressed constraints on the character from outside stakeholders (i.e., other teachers, students, administrators, parents, and community members).

Details were important within listening exercises confined to the macro and micro levels. Teachers and school leaders reciprocated listening and story-telling while the listeners denoted generalized, then finite details. In the example of block scheduling, the biggest macro details were time management and students' courses that were based-on graduation credits. More concise details included preventing students arriving late to their first period class, or leaving early because of an unstructured study hall.

Faculty within the listening group employed tips for effective listening. The hardest task was to only listen to the speaker, while disallowing other thoughts and distractions. Also, one suspended response formulation until the speaker finished. Maintaining eye contact was another advantage for faculty to ensure active-listening (Harvard Business School Press, 2007). All listening activities ended in a closure (or "debriefing") activity that will be highlighted in the upcoming segment of this paper.

2. Errors in Negotiating

Another decisive behavioral criterion was negotiation. Before any bargaining between school leaders and teachers commenced within a district, there must be interconnectivity between the stakeholders, while preceding any agenda or material dissemination (Block, 2009). For purposes of this research, bargaining encompassed informal negotiation between parties, and not centering on a formalized, unionized collective bargaining action.

Errors in this informal negotiating occurred when there was a fundamental lack of empathy for either party; errors in causal judgment (also known as erroneous feelings) percolated and escalated. This was evident when individuals felt: coerced, harassed, and unsupported (Harvard Business School Press, 2007; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010). Faculty or school leaders felt alarmed, or panicked. Often among untenured teachers, self-pressure to maintain status quo and not be "too creative" kept novice faculty from contributing fully and thoughtfully. The enemy image was rampant. This

suggested that novice teachers "better watch-out," or they will "not become tenured" (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Causal judgmental errors displayed in feelings of harassment derived from faculty or administration feeling aggravated or stressed. A new school leader may not understand the dynamics and influence of the faculty or community. Feeling overwhelmed led to refraining from asking for faculty collaboration on a new project. Another example showed an ad hoc group pressuring a new administrator to make decisions in an untimely or unprofessional manner. This surmounting stress caused future errors in negotiation, while promoting distance and a lack of trust. Drawing comparisons- "If you were just more like …" was detrimental to the bond between school leaders and faculty because it permitted the rhetoric and perception that one did not belong, or fit into, the district's vision (Harvard Business School Press, 2007; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

The last causal judgment derived from feeling unsupported. Aligned with resentment, this occurred if parties did not acknowledge the other's contribution. If a group of faculty worked on a departmental project, and did not receive much attention from the school leader upon its completion, it had a devastating effect on future volunteerism, and motivation, as well as creativity. Lack of proper recognition had a spiral effect onto subsequent projects, while diminishing the volunteerism on future projects. Verbal errors within this category were one-upping, e.g., a school leader told the Science Department, "That project was OK, but here is a better idea- listen to this" (Harvard Business School Press, 2007; Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

2.1. Solutions in Negotiating

In order to work efficiently and have successful negotiations between parties, one must work persistently and constructively with all individuals. This included obtaining applicable and practical resources, or gain human or fiscal aid for the support of all parties (Hackman, 2010). To solve effectively the error of coercion within faulty negotiations, all sides should have options of choice, freedom, and self-productiveness. To combat feelings of

harassment, both school leaders and faculty needed to show consideration of the other side. Finally, unsupported rhetoric and action between parties should be treated with understanding of their differences (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Returning to the example of hosting a faculty dialog to discuss the best modes of informal school negotiations, the following plan ensued: small groups consisted of at least one administrator and three faculty members seated close to each other. The speaker stated the purpose of this dialog. The purpose was to listen more thoughtfully to all members within the group, and to better understand the negotiating terms (Harvard Business School Press, 2007; Schein, 2010).

Within the negotiating seminar, veteran teachers were upset because a lack of substitute teachers (on days that novice teachers had to attend professional development seminars) forced them to teach additional classes with no mention of any form of compensation. This heated issue was remedied by the template assessing the other side's interest, and also offered various forms of compensation, if fiscal remittance was not possible (Harvard Business School Press, 2007). The following two dialog prompts fit the above scenario (see Appendix II). There were two main questions within this dialog, (a) "what have you learned from the other (bargaining) side? and (b) what is the other side's BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement?)" (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

The school leaders learned that veteran teachers were upset because they were told, not asked, to perform a duty outside of their contract. The teachers learned that the district could not find enough certified substitutes for a half-day. The group discussed possible remedies. Hypothetically, if the district cannot afford to pay a stipend to a teacher who taught the absent teacher's classes, then other possibilities included, (a) being relieved from another supervision, or duty, (b) permission to leave early on another day, and (c) having the option of volunteering for another task without penalty.

3. Reflecting Tasks

Reflecting was an important behavioral task in every activity that faculty and school leaders conducted. It was

not complex, but it must be consistent for every activity. Within these two seminars of listening and negotiation, the best practice was to reflect first in small groups, then in hypothetical larger groups. After the listening exercises were completed, one member of the group asked follow-up questions such as, "I understand that you mean …" or "I hear you saying …" (Glickman et al., 2010, p.112). For the closure activity in the negotiation seminar, each group presented their worksheet findings to the rest of the seminar as verification of perception, i.e., did other groups respond to the speaking group accurately in their assessment of perception (Glickman et al., 2010).

Keeping a reflection log was another good way for stakeholders in a district to continue to be analytical without making the same errors twice. Also, it permitted various views of perception because time had elapsed between entries on this log. Reflection on past-experiences prevented the same problems in the future (Robbins and Alvy, 2009). Exchanging possible solutions was also another reflecting technique that was very useful to both parties at an impasse in their negotiating.

The element of reflection incorporated criteria of a plan, designation of goals, and maintenance of performance (Covey, 1991). Finding the terms where both sides were connected in agreement (and understood their disagreements) was a good starting-point (Glickman et al., 2010; Harvard Business School Press, 2007). Invariably, asking either side for aligned solutions to a problem superseded the task of problem-solving; this was accomplished through reflecting. Envisioning and working toward the future was more productive than stopping chronically-temporal problems within a school district. Also called Destination Strategy, envisioning the future encompassed the following reflecting benchmarks: study and analyze the need, bring others on board, and loop back (Block, 2009).

When individuals studied and analyzed the need of reflecting, the objective was change promotion. Surveying community members implemented well this change by involving organizations and people who had creativity and considerable resources. Finally, looping back was a reflecting task highlighting starting over. It distinguished where the task went wrong, who was involved, before

designing a new plan so the problem does not recur. Reflecting and amending were two pertinent areas of a district's continual reflection (Block, 2009; Gunther et al., 2011).

Reflecting was also not only a silent, solitary, task, but linked to communication of school stakeholders. The school district would benefit from the diverse work of an ad hoc committee incorporating various views of the community, faculty, and school leadership. Goals should be cooperation and clarifying district objectives free of anticipated behavioral errors (Gunther et al., 2011).

4. Recommendations

Organizational commitment was linked to a community spirit. The behavioral elements of effective listening, negotiation, and reflecting were a part of a school district's cohesiveness. Effective listening must be practiced habitually in order to remove the notion of formulating a response or rebuttal in lieu of listening. Errors in speech deterred the listener from effective listening; however, elision and intrusion of sounds were not the sole reasons for ineffective listening. Story-listening passages were successful tools to help effective listening skills, since demonstrating the formerly-overlooked macro and micro details. These details were fragmented into smaller segments for later reflection.

Consistency within negotiation was also imperative. School leaders and teachers cannot make any headway if trust and empathy were not prevalent; while subsequently, causal judgments tore-away any relationship between teachers and school leaders. Strategies to prevent causal judgments were contingent upon having applicable resources (both social and fiscal) in order to supply individuals with choices of autonomy, psychological safety, and the proper tools to be productive. Specifically, there were times in a school district when funding and the needed-tools to complete a task were misaligned. An example was a school leader asking a teacher to take students on a field trip without realizing that the transportation budgets cannot accommodate such a request.

Keeping a reflection log of goals and performances was an excellent way for all members of the district to ensure

that the same errors did not recur, as well as introducing new techniques for all teachers to become involved. Understanding errors of behavioral traits can be corrected easily. It was the first step to unilateral school delegation when others were included within the problem-solving techniques. A school leader must have faith in others and respect for their differences (Covey, 1991).

Conclusion

To create organizational unity, individuals must not become distracted by their surrounding phenomena. This includes, (a) clinging strongly to basic assumptions and (b) developing tight ideals surrounding their own role within a larger framework (Schein, 2010). Assessing and challenging leaders and faculty's roles were difficult since everyone aligned their future aspirations to past-achievements. By doing so, the elements of positively promoting ego and self-confidence are set forth (Schein, 2010).

Proper unilateral delegation was achieved when faculty and school leaders ascertained a level of psychological safety to express their unique role within the district. Administering change and promoting commitment can only be predicated upon the stakeholders' coalesce. Resistance to change stemmed from the need of unlearning a task before re-learning a task before a new system structure was taught (Schein, 2010).

Conclusively, individuals within a district must reciprocate responsibility, while knowing criteria of expectations, guidelines, and resources. School leaders must be seen helpful and not as a "distrustful hierarchical power." This is accomplished by removing obstacles, provided support, and promoted faculty's actions. School administration and faculty self-reflected and obtained accountability for their decisions and their actions. Most often, faculty was evaluated by the effectiveness or aesthetics of the final product, and not on their performance of its construction (Covey, 1991). Perhaps this is where the disconnect starts, as one continually seeks to validates their own individualism within academic collaborative work effort.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Gist	Specific Information	Detail	Inferential
Generalized main ideas?	What are the intended specific facts?	What are the reasons within the Specific Facts?	Where does the story go from here?
What is the speaker's stance?			How do we implement the data from the previous three categories?

Table A1. Table used for Effective Story-listening Passage on Block Scheduling (Hosseini, 2009)

Appendix II

Figure used to asses two negotiating sides of a school district (Harvard Business School Press, 2007)

NEGOTIATING OUTCOMES

Assessing the Other Side's Interests

Use this worksheet to summarize your knowledge of the other side's interests. Refer to this information throughout the negotiation process, and use it to identify value-creating opportunities.

Learn about the other side.	Yes	No
1. Have you spoken with people—either formally or informally—who know the other party?		
2. Have you reviewed the other side's Web site, marketing materials, and (if applicable) annual reports and public findings?		
3. Have you researched the other side's industry and contacted sources within the industry to find out more?		
4. Have you imagined what the other side's interests, preferences, and needs would be if you were in its position?		

Assess the other side's BATNA.

What do you know about the other side's business circumstances?
How strong is its financial performance?

What is its strategy?

What are its key corporate initiatives?

What competitive pressures does it face?

What do you know about the value this deal has to the other side?
How important is this deal to the other side at this time?

Is it necessary for the other side to meet a larger objective? *(Describe the objective.)*

What do you know about the availability of a replacement deal?
Is your offer easy to find elsewhere?

Can it be obtained in time to meet the other side's deadlines?

Has the other side already obtained bids from or initiated informal negotiations with anyone else?

Consider the terms the other side would like to see for the deal.

What broader business objectives would the other side like to see served by this deal?

What terms of this deal could hamper its business growth?

What terms might you offer that would benefit the other side (at a low cost to you)?

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