

An Effective Leader in Higher Education: Charles William Eliot

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While responding to increasing calls for accountability, educational leaders are challenged continually by a myriad of complex tasks amidst the need to adapt their postsecondary institutions for responding to the changing needs of society. This review of literature examines comparisons between the leadership style of Charles William Eliot and the prescribed theories introduced in current literature and textbooks. More specifically, it includes treatment of the leadership theories used, organizational environments, and the mindset and actions of followers.

Keywords: leadership theories, organizational environments, Charles William Eliot

As a highly successful leader in the field of higher education and much information about his accomplishments that exists in the literature, Charles William Eliot has served as an icon of effective educational leadership for more than 40 years (Rudolph, 1990). His leadership style paralleled somewhat to those found in traditional organizational structures after the 19th century, leadership in educational organizations is still something of a new creation, as modern schools did not seek out educational leaders to run their organizations until the past several decades, as explained by Hoy and Miskel (2001). This review of literature conspicuously and profoundly describes Eliot's effective leadership style and the traits needed for bringing about transformational change within a highly dynamic environment of social interaction within, outside, and between the internal and external organizations (Hawkins, 1972; Hanson, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Rudolph, 1990). This work focuses on comparisons between Eliot and the prescribed theories introduced in current literature and textbooks, to include more specifically the leadership theories used,

organizational environments, and the mindset and actions of followers. Additionally, it will help address the purpose of higher education, who should attend, what should be taught and studied, how higher education should be structured, governed, and financed, the role of federal government, and the role of higher education for society.

Eliot, rising up from within the Harvard ranks, possessed a leadership quality vital to his success as president of Harvard, for which Nicolo Machiavelli (1518) provides the following insight:

A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank. (p. 34)

This reference deals particularly with the effectiveness resulting from his innate

persistence in seeing things through, including change.

According to Perry (1931), “Eliot was a reformer by temperament and capacity, as well as opportunity. Being an optimist he was not likely to be satisfied with things as they were, - he could always think of something better” (p. 9). In the years prior to his election, Eliot held the same philosophical beliefs as his uncle, George Ticknor, and professor Ralph Waldo Emerson about education reform, and held them into his retirement (Hawkins, 1966; Wagner, 1950). As a transformational leader, Eliot operated mostly from Max Weber’s classical organization theory, where he was at the top of the organization with a clear division of labor, span of control, hierarchy, definition of goals, extrinsic rewards, and formal rules (Hanson, 2003; Hawkins, 1972). Hanson (2003) makes clear: “The tone of an organization is usually sounded by its top executive, and the success of the enterprise may well depend on whether he infuses the whole hierarchy with energy and vision or whether, through ineptness or neglect, he allows the organization to stagnate” (p. 154). However, it seems that Eliot was trying to shift Harvard from *classical system* to an *open system* framework, as evidenced in his attempts to get others to respond to the exchange of external influences on Harvard. In one instance, Hawkins (1972) wrote, “Eliot was a doctrinaire advocate of *laissez-faire*” (p. 149). This is not to say that he left important matters to others nor did he not consider others’ views before making important decisions. On the contrary, he often consulted with fellow colleagues, such as Asa Gray, Andrew White, Emerson, Ticknor, his close friend Daniel Gilman, and others, especially on issues concerning the elective curriculum (Thelin, 2004; Hawkins, 1972).

Eliot also operated from an *open systems* theory perspective prior to its label by Chester Bernard in the 1960s. Hoy & Miskel (2001) define this perspective as “the overarching framework that underscores four internal subsystems that interact to influence organizational behavior: the structural, cultural, individual, and political systems”, and takes into account the exchange between the organization and its environment (p. 20). In Eliot’s case, the internal and external influences are those of the

students, faculty, and public to reshape the face of education for the 19th century and beyond for supporting “the triumphant nationalism of the year that saw a railroad span the continent and Ulysses S. Grant enter the White House” (Hawkins, 1966, p. 296). Carpenter (1951) sums up a broad picture of the external influences on higher education and the need for change by stating: “Up to 1869 the universities of America had prepared their graduates primarily for the professions. But educational institutions were forced to open new areas of study to meet the demands of an increasingly complex pattern of life” (p. 23). Although this passage paints a broad picture of what Eliot was prepared to devote the next 40 years of his life to doing, he did not attempt to pursue his transformational changes alone.

In no attempt to thoroughly define leadership, A. W. Aston & H. S. Aston (2000) believe that since “leadership is a process that is ultimately concerned with fostering change...it implies a process where there is movement”, which “also implies intentionality, in a sense that the implied change is not random...but is rather directed toward some future end or condition which is desired or valued.” They continue to say, “Leadership is, by definition, a collective or group process” (p. 8). Further refined, Eliot could only make change happen through others; through transformational leadership where faculty, students, administrators, and other staff become change agents.

Because of Eliot’s introduction of the elective system, “liberty, self-control, [and] self-government were given a freer scope” (Kuehnemann, 1909, p. 13). From this, faculty benefited from the prestige of being able to exercise their own academic freedom and to increase their scholarship. Meanwhile, students were given the autonomy to select courses from a set of purely elective curriculum in challenging themselves further, and to take on the responsibility of becoming self-governing and self-disciplined in the actions and behavior. In addition, Eliot “invited other people to state their views, and he really meant it...and “wanted other people to be as self-assertive as he was himself...he listened with his mind, and attentively considered what you had to say while

you said it,” Perry (1930) explains (p. 14). In this respect, Eliot was acting as a change agent by developing transformational leadership in the members within the college’s own hierarchy. As Nahavandi (2003) states, “Transformational leadership also suggests that the majority of leadership theories focus on the exchange and interaction between leaders and their followers” (p. 235). Evidenced throughout much of the literature, Eliot communicated constantly and directly his very thoughts, plans, and ideals with those willing and not willing to listen, while being very passionate about them. His leadership qualities were congruent with Aston and Aston’s (2000) views on individual qualities, such as “self-knowledge, authenticity/integrity, commitment, empathy/understanding of others, and competence” (p. 12).

With regard to his self-knowledge, Eliot had many beliefs and opinions that remained unchanged over the years and had more to do with admitting his own shortfalls rather than focusing on his successes. Hawkins (1972) cites one example where “Eliot openly admitted the failure of his experiment” (p. 55). It was not too often that things went awry, but when they did, he admitted it openly.

Eliot’s authenticity and understanding of others came from his own personal experiences, of which he revealed in his candor toward others. Given his experience as a student, math tutor, and Chemistry professor at Harvard under the old “collegiate” system of strict curriculum and rules, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for a short period, and his period of studies in “Chemistry in France, Germany, and England”, Eliot could not have done more to prepare himself as an educational leader (James, 1930; Kuehnemann, 1909, p. 72). Perry (1931) revealed, “his finest quality, I think, was his tolerance. Though he expected much of men, he was willing to make allowances. He was confident, aggressive, and self-reliant, but he was not arrogant” (p. 17). His authenticity was further stated in the *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*: “He is a Puritan to the core, and a Puritan of the very best type—with simplicity, hard work, and a passion for truth and liberty as the guiding motives of his life” (Eliot, 1921, p. 4). This

passage is indicative of what Aston & Aston (2000) indicate is the essence of the authenticity of a leader; “that individuals be willing to share their views with others even when there is a good chance that others may hold contrary views” (p. 15).

Yet, another leadership characteristic commonly revealed in Eliot’s writings is his fidelity and commitment toward his family, work, and religion, as stated by James (1930) from one of his letters to his mother on March 16, 1854, expressing his passion for science, “And yet, while I honor other professions I must be devoted to my own; not slothful, but diligent and zealous in my calling” (p. 66). According to Aston & Aston (2000), this vital leadership quality “implies passion, intensity, and persistence. It supplies the psychic and physical energy that motivates the individual to serve, that drives the collective effort, and that sustains that effort during difficult times” (p. 13). His good health and crisp mind, even into his later years, provided him the stamina and power to, not only finish what he started with his elaborate elective system, but also continue his work as a Harvard trustee (James, 1930). Kuehnemann (1909) made further inferences of Eliot’s dynamic physical and mental strength by stating,

Eliot’s life has been a life of struggle. In the first decades of his presidency of Harvard he had overcome the united resistance of all adherents of tradition. By his fearless frankness of speech he has again and again given offence, now to one, now to another class of people. (p. 80)

And paralleled by Aston and Aston’s (2000) reference to:

Empathy/understanding of others. The capacity to ‘put yourself in the other person’s place’ is critical to effective *collaboration*, building trust and resolving issues in viewpoint. It also requires the cultivation and use of what is probably our most neglected communication skill: *listening*. (p. 13)

As stated previously, Eliot understood the vital importance of this skill very well. Simply stated by Perry (1931),

His idea of conversation was that two individuals should alternatively speak and listen. When his turn came he listened, and his listening was not mere silence it was a form of activity. He listened with his ears, and cocked his head lest anything escape him. (p. 14)

Eliot's philosophy of effective listening also parallels the work of Machiavelli (1513), who stated:

A prince, therefore, ought always to take counsel, but only when he wishes and not when others wish; he ought rather to discourage everyone from offering advice unless he asks it; but, however, he ought to be a constant inquirer, and afterwards a patient listener concerning the things of which he inquired. (p. 52)

Possibly without conscious realization, Eliot was altering the cultures of the organization, the people in it, and those outside it.

"Competence", the last individual quality explained by Aston & Aston (2000), "refers to the knowledge, skill, and technical expertise required for successful completion of the transformative effort" (p. 13). As James (1930) does well to mention the most important accomplishments made by Eliot, his thorough training and experiences are what brought him to his high level of competence through hands-on tasks, navigating him through real life experiences. Most often, he assumed a leadership role in making things happen as the opportunities arose for him. Witnessing the academic atrocities that were being committed against the students, faculty, and society during the antebellum, Civil War, and post-bellum period as a student, tutor, and professor, Eliot gained a pragmatic perspective of the actions that were necessary. As referenced by Carpenter (1951), "Eliot's inaugural signaled the end of the rigidity prescribed curriculum at Harvard. The new system opened the way to the kind of specialized study which has dominated American higher education for the past several

decades; it created a vastly extended curriculum, a series of courses of graduated difficulty in each subject, and a demand for new teachers", "the system of punishments for minor disciplinary infractions...was terminated", and "laboratory facilities were greatly expanded" (p. 26). Although Eliot did not seek out the Harvard presidency, he spent much time at Harvard, some time as a professor at MIT, a period of time studying in France, Germany, and England; more than enough time to gain the competence and steam necessary for instituting change through his elective plan (James, 1930; Hawkins, 1972). As Herbst (1973) indicated, "Eliot's temperament and convictions helped him to adopt that role until in the perception of the country at large Harvard and Eliot had become synonymous: the man and the institution both were seen as a private resource in the service of the public" (p. 249). Accordingly, Eliot's competence to get the job done was by no means absent throughout his 40-year presidency, and later. But more specifically, he reformed Harvard as an educational organization.

During his tenure, Eliot reformed Harvard into a "smart educational organization," where by "organizations pursue intelligence. In that pursuit, according to Hanson (2003), they process information, formulate plans and aspirations, interpret environments, generate strategies and decisions, monitor experiences and learn from them, and imitate others as they do the same" (p. 289). How, then, did the organization of Harvard do that? As previously explained, Eliot was a change agent who forecasted the need for institutional change based on societal reformations following the Civil War, and worked to make the students and faculty change agents. By changing the culture of the school after realizing that change was inevitable and necessary, he devised and set into motion a well thought out plan of giving the students the freedom to choose their courses, give faculty their academic freedom, expand the number and type of courses available, and build colleges within the university (Rudolph, 1990; James, 1930). Hanson (2003) refers to this type of organizational change as "environmental shock, wherein changes in an educational system's external environment get seriously

ahead of any incremental adaptations the schools can make. When organizations are highly institutionalized and inflexible, they become vulnerable to environmental shock” (p. 288). Because we were a nation of rapid and change during Eliot’s tenure at Harvard, he was left with little choice but to take quick action, which he warned would take generations to take full effect (Hawkins, 1966).

In closing, observing and reviewing literature about successful leaders in and out of the field of education will continue to be the cornerstone of learning about effective leadership. Although Charles William Eliot was an educational leader from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, his more than 40 years of achievements have done very well to influence educational organizations at every level epitomizing effective educational leadership for more than 40 years in the midst of significant societal reformation (Rudolph, 1990). Moreover, the leadership styles found in traditional organizational structures since the 19th century are in many ways similar to education organizations. However, leadership in educational organizations is a relatively new creation since modern schools have only recently sought out educational leaders to lead their organizations over the past several decades, as explained by Hoy & Miskel (2001). The review of literature richly describes Eliot’s effective leadership style in seeking transformational change in a highly diverse and interactive environment of education encompassing social interaction within, outside, and between the internal and external organizations (Hawkins, 1972; Hanson, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Rudolph, 1990).

This work has focused on comparisons between the Charles William Eliot’s leadership practices and the theories introduced in current literature and textbooks, more specifically to include the leadership theories used, organizational environments, and the mindset and actions of followers. It has also served to help define that higher education primarily serves a public purpose, that any student can attend, and courses that prepare students for responsible public service should be taught. Furthermore, it aided in establishing that higher education should be structured to accommodate

the learning needs of the students, governed partially by the students and partially by a governing body, and financed partially by the students and partially by outside sources. Lastly, that the role of federal government should be to assist colleges in helping the students academically succeed, and that higher education has a responsibility to society by producing citizens responsible for actively governing our democracy.

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