

A Comparison Between Collaborative and Authoritative Leadership Styles of Special Education Administrators

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Abstract

Supervisors, administrators, and directors of special education usually use the authoritative leadership style when supervising their special education staffs; however, collaborative leadership styles are slowly overtaking authoritative leadership styles. These leaders have the task of producing an environment where the culture is inclusive, the relationships are positive, and partnerships are developed and responsible for the success of all students with disabilities. Managing strictly by objectives could produce a close-minded type of system that could produce an unpleasant environment, making it difficult for special education teachers to do their jobs efficiently. In this article, the author compares and contrasts the collaborative leadership style with the authoritative leadership style amongst special education personnel in leadership positions. A review of literature determines utilizing a more collaborative leadership style is successful at increasing special education staff productivity.

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“Leadership is the ability to get men to do what they don’t like to do and like it (Harry S. Truman)” (Sadler, 2003, p.5). This concept of leadership is not as simple as it sounds, especially when leadership in the special education field occurs. Building administrators, central office supervisors and district directors of special education face the challenging task of exhibiting leadership skills to be effective in their special education settings on a daily basis. These skills form based on their own individual style of leadership. The type of leadership style utilized in special education is critical to achieving the most desirable outcomes for students with disabilities and the staff committed to helping them reach their goals. Leaders use several leadership styles throughout the education arena, with two standing in the forefront of leadership studies. Authoritative and collaborative leadership are styles of leadership used in the field. Authoritative style, when used in the past, may have had its successes, but with the rise of education reform directly effecting students with disabilities, collaborative leadership is effective in leading special education staff to improved levels of productivity within an environment conducive to good working relationships. The purpose of this paper

is to compare and contrast authoritative and collaborative leadership, in order to acknowledge the most successful approach when working with special education staff members.

Authoritative Leadership

Authoritative, or autocratic, leadership can be both desirable and unrelenting when used in a supervisory role in education. Bass (2008) describes the authoritative-autocratic cluster of leadership style as “being arbitrary, controlling, power-oriented, coercive, punitive, and close-minded” (p.440). He seems to mean when leading in this manner, the person is solely in control of the performance of their subordinates and of all the decision-making. Sadler (2003) further notes the authoritative leader makes decisions and imposes them on everyone else, expecting implementation without question. The result would be to reach the decision without regard for feelings. For example, a supervisor in a textile factory setting would delegate tasks to ensure the company makes daily production. The subordinates would not give an opinion or feel as if they had a choice in regards to getting the work completed before the end of the shift.

Despite the possible harshness authoritative leaders can possess, they also produce structure, rules, and compliance (Bass, 2008). Authoritative leaders depend on their official rank to regulate the behavior of their subordinates (Bass, 2008). This type of behavior produces followers even when they are unwilling. With the security of legal support and the ability to maintain order, the authoritative leadership style can warrant results. In this respect, Goleman (2000) found that authoritative leadership increases the commitment to the organization’s goals; therefore, a vision can be established and carried out effectively. In the business world, authoritative leaders state the result of a process while giving his or her subordinates the flexibility and freedom to take risks and experiment in order to get the job done (Goleman, 2000). This could mean that the leader does not expect to hear any questions and is not concerned with how they reach a goal, as long as it is accomplished. Another form of leadership used in education takes a more collaborative approach.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative, or democratic, leadership can be endearing, person-oriented, but occasionally dependant on others, when applied in the education field. This style of leadership can be described as considerate, consultative, participative, and employee-centered (Bass, 2008). The underlying characteristic of this style seems to be the ability to share in decision-making. Goleman (2000) finds that by spending time getting people’s ideas and mutual agreements, a collaborative leader builds “trust, respect and commitment” with their subordinates (p.84). When utilizing this style, the leader invites discussion to confer solutions to problems (Sadler, 2003). Collaborative leaders have to be willing to accept responsibility for the decisions everyone made as the correct choice (Sadler,

2003). This approach to leadership has the ability to produce cohesiveness and commitment to organization when everyone has a sense of equality. Bass (2008) also notes collaborative leaders elicit ideas from their subordinates to produce a better way of getting things accomplished, are open to criticism, and tend to treat their mistakes as opportunities to learn what not to do in any given situation. For instance, a school principal could establish a collaborative school-based leadership team where he or she structures monthly meetings to discuss the concerns of the school. With the representation of all grade levels and support staff at the meeting, the principal could use everyone's input to manage the entire school effectively.

Even though using the collaborative leadership style seems to govern it as all-inclusive, its dependency on the input of others may not always produce positive outcomes. Goleman (2000) found when leaders and staff members mull over ideas, in what seems like endless meetings, there is a chance decisions become less than effective. This could result in the subordinates, or staff members, becoming restless and confused about the proposed problem even more than they may have been before they began deliberating. Some staff may even decide to refrain from participating, thus inadvertently prolonging the decision-making process much further. In the business world, the collaborative, more democratic style of leadership does not always produce the quick results an organization may need. Goleman (2000) insists, "Building consensus is wrongheaded in the time of crisis" (p.85). He adds practicing this leadership style drives up flexibility and responsibility of the subordinates. With this said, it is safe to assume authoritative and collaborative leadership could be evaluated to determine their similarities and differences as they are commonly viewed.

Similarities

To compare authoritative and collaborative leadership, most supervisory situations call for either one or the other, but could have the qualities of both styles. In any given situation, regardless of whether the supervisor makes the decisions on his or her own or consults a committee, he or she is still ultimately responsible for the results. Both authoritative and consultative leaders base their decisions on facts and are knowledgeable of the tasks in order to make the decision (Bass, 2008). They must be well educated in order to carry out their decision-making processes effectively. Regardless of how they achieve their goals, they must utilize others in the organization in some form, realizing they need staff members to reach the organization's goals. The staff plays a significant role in the implementation of their selected duties, their performance is necessary or the organization suffers.

Sadler (2003) adds the leaders are responsible for the set of ethics or norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization. The leaders, whether their style is authoritative or collaborative, sets the tone for the environment. If the authoritative leader is negative and withdrawn, it is highly likely that his

organization will be too. If the collaborative leader promotes treating each other as equals, then the staff would more likely collaborate with each other even when the leader is absent. Bass (2008) claims although authoritative leaders tend to be dictators, showing concern for their subordinates' needs is common. He also suggests collaborative leaders could facilitate group decision making, but also push to get the job done. Along with these varied similarities, there are also distinct differences between authoritative and collaborative leadership styles.

Differences

After previously introducing the two leadership styles, several distinct differences emerged. To start, it would seem that authoritative and collaborative styles were opposites in every right. In regards to character traits, the authoritative leader is controlling and close-minded, while the collaborative leader practices being open-minded and reasonable when interacting with their staff members (Bass, 2008). During the process of decision-making, authoritative leaders are not open for suggestions, nor do they want to be bothered with inquisitive staff members (Bass, 2008). On the other hand, Sadler (2003) tells us that collaborative leaders invite discussions to generate ideas with the hopes of reaching a consensus. This type of collaborating leads to long-term results, while the dominating, authoritarian tends to mostly produce short-term results (Bass, 2008). Depending on the situation, the result is either negative or positive.

Another aspect of how authoritative leaders differ from collaborative leaders is in how they treat others. The collaborator makes attempt to sustain or boost moral to produce high quality results (Goleman, 2000). Although authoritative leaders can develop loyal and devoted followers, they potentially treat everyone in an abrasive manner, with hardly any regard to the feelings of others (Bass, 2008). Staff members tend to dislike authoritative leaders, and rightfully so, since their supervision could be abusive, create fear, and use punishment when situations do not go as planned (Bass, 2008). On the opposite end, staff members tend to like their collaborative leaders, as the leaders show genuine concern with the maintenance of good working conditions (Bass, 2008).

When looking at the results these styles produce, different factors play a major role in the accomplishing tasks using either leadership style. Goleman (2000) found using collaborative leadership style could cause conflicts among staff members. Arguments could keep everyone from reaching an agreement. On the other hand, authoritative leaders do not give room for arguing because no one is encouraged to work together. Goleman (2000) decided this approach could work well in business situations, but collaborative leadership would not, if the staff members are too incompetent to contribute to the process. Consequently, if the staff members are more competent than the authoritative leader, his or her inadequacies could reduce morale (Goleman, 2000). To add purpose to these generalizations, the following section will give the factors involved to determine

the more successful leadership style for a supervisor to possess when managing a special education staff.

Special Education Leadership

Supervisors practice collaborative and authoritative leadership styles in various fields, but in the special education field, when they know which style will produce favorable situations in the supervision of staff members success is a likely result. Like business, education is a complex field run by supervisors and administrators. Special education has numerous stakeholders, including school principals, program administrators, directors (district and state), and teachers. DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) reveal that special education has evolved from segregated classroom characterized by low academic expectations, social isolation, and poor curriculum to widespread recognition that effective special education is not a place in a school building.

In the past, it was common for special educators and general educators to take on a different approach to leadership, but with the inception of federal laws and the influx of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, it is no longer feasible to depend on separate administrative structures (Crockett, 2002). Crockett (2002) also notes special education programs currently have experienced a major reduction in isolated services and relies more on collaborations in order to serve students better. In order to continue applying this concept, special education administrators and supervisors would implement their own style of leadership that would promote the productivity and satisfaction of special education personnel in the work environment. They should base their style on their individual behaviors and attitudes toward how they are to lead their staff. Once they make the choice, it has a strong effect on all aspects of staff members working conditions (DiPaola et al., 2004).

When deciding between collaborative and authoritative leadership styles of managing special education staff, it is important to know the characteristics of the collaborative style correlate with the roles and responsibilities of a successful special education supervisor. Weaver and Landers (2003) compiled the behaviors supportive special education supervisors exhibited from combined studies (Guzman, 1997; Potter & Husley, 2001; Heizman, 2001; Lupsky & Gartner, 1997; as cited in Weaver, Landers, Stephens, and Joseph, 2003). These behaviors include: a) uses a system of communication allowing staff members to oppose policies and practices making recommendations for change, b) works with staff to agree collaboratively on an attitude of inclusion, and c) demonstrates skills in problem-solving (Weaver et al., 2003). In addition, special education supervisors model leadership and ensure teachers, paraprofessionals, related service personnel, other building support staff, and parents receive the ongoing training and support needed (Weaver et al., 2003).

The supportive actions of the administrators of special education directly contribute to their leadership style, as do their understanding of the role played on the success of their special education program. Doyle (2003) notes blending authoritative, rule-based legal mandates with a more collaborative, democratic leadership would place a strain on the role. Traditionally, the systems used to monitor the progress of students with disabilities to ensure compliance were heavily procedure based and turned special education administrators into the watch guards of programs (Doyle, 2003). Taking an authoritative approach would seem warranted since strict rules and procedures are what drive the special education programs, but student achievement should be the main goal. Slater (2005) submits administrators that were trained and rewarded for running a well-managed program and consistently took control of decisions must learn to lead in a more participatory manner.

If the special education supervisor utilized authoritative leadership style to implement their programs, this could call for unfavorable results. As previously stated, authoritative style of leadership can be unrelenting then it comes to implementing their special education programs without paying careful attention to the factors that contribute to meaningful results. In any given situation, whether it is the development of a student's individualized education plan (IEP) or a decision regarding a change in a student's placement, administration cannot exhibit close-minded and abrasive behavior. Managing strictly by objectives could produce a close-minded type of system that could produce an unpleasant environment and making it difficult for teachers to do their jobs efficiently (Birnbaum, 2006). The decision could adversely affect both the students and staff even if the special education administration comes to a sole conclusion they are correct in their decision-making.

In special education, the role the leader takes makes a strong statement about the quality of services that will be delivered to the students and parents (Birnbaum, 2006). This could mean if the supervisor decides to make all of the decisions and does not include those most important in the students' education, then there is a chance that the services will not reflect the level of quality the students' deserve. This includes the interactions with the staff members and their willingness to proceed in carrying out the decisions. Collaborative leadership style would be preferred in this case to allow for a better working atmosphere and increase in productivity of special education staff members.

Collaborative Special Education Leadership

To create a climate rid of authoritative attitudes and unfavorable working conditions, special education supervisors must adopt a collaborative leadership style when managing their staff. Ford and Clark (2003) state collaboration indicates the desirable working relationships within a school setting (as cited in Weaver et al., 2003). Special education administrators, supervisors, and directors have the responsibility to produce an environment where the culture is inclusive,

the relationships are positive, and partnerships are developed and responsible for the success of all students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004). Billingsley (2005) states leaders need to focus their concentration on: a) creating a collaborative environment, b) developing acceptable working conditions, and c) promoting wellness with increased support. When linking collaborative practices to the role of special education supervisors, consideration of several key factors would allow for progress in these areas. These areas are school culture, instructional leadership, organizational management, and staff support.

School Culture

A collaborative special education supervisor embraces the area of developing an inclusive school culture. Staff members are responsible for the learning environment and knowing their superiors are involved in the empowerment of all students, thus helping to boost overall morale. Walther-Thomas and DiPaola (2003) mention competent leaders create a culture, and establish a climate for change, by enticing their constituents into developing a well-supported vision and mission. They could do so by becoming a positive role model. A sense of belonging could develop amongst the staff members if the special education supervisor attempts to involve all stakeholders necessary into the decision-making processes regarding students with disabilities. In this case, leaders would do their best to portray a genuine concern for every student, regardless of level of disability. This helps to reduce any doubts staff members may have in the leadership as it pertains to their students. For example, the special education supervisor would make all efforts possible to advocate for and attend IEP meetings for the students with severe and profound disabilities, just as he or she would for students with mild disabilities. Divisions among students can cause division among staff members as well.

DiPaola et al. (2004) agrees grounded norms must be set in the value of academic effort and support for the achievement of all students. Staff members should be working together to create solutions, but this cannot happen if a culture of sharing is never introduced. Walther-Thomas and DiPaola (2003) and DiPaola et al. (2004) agree that special education supervisors should try to develop staff members' leadership skills in order to capitalize on their collective knowledge and contributions to the special education programs in order to help shape the programs' culture. As collaborative leadership style works to improve the school culture, it also assists in improving the instructional leadership skills of the special education supervisor.

Instructional Leadership

Since the education of students with disabilities should be the primary reason for special education programs, the special education supervisor must serve as an instructional leader to model the most successful behaviors to the special education staff. Taking on a collaborative style of leadership to carry out this role

is sure to improve the education of the students while providing the instructional support staff members need to teach the students on a high standard. It also helps the instructional leaders contribute a great deal to the school culture (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006). DiPaola et al. (2004) add the expectations of leaders help to ensure ongoing professional development. If the special education supervisor is knowledgeable of the academic needs of the students, he or she could make it a priority to encourage staff members to participate in staff developments and workshops on specific topics designed for students with disabilities.

It also helps to be supportive of the staff members collaborating with each other in the classrooms to help reduce any uncertainties. Walther-Thomas and DiPaola (2003) found that many teachers, consultants, and paraprofessionals lack the necessary training and preparation to collaborate efficiently with other adults in the classroom. The instructional leadership skills the special education supervisor possesses should be used as an aid in skill development for staff, if possible. DiPaola et al. (2004) tells us good administrators work alongside teachers and students. Having a presence in the classroom would help staff members develop trust in the leader and their willingness to work collaboratively with them. The instructional support becomes vital to the success of the students and their programs. This support used to help staff members could help them make decisions on how best to teach their students. Now that federal mandates placed on all students demand results, using collaborative leadership to guide decisions, regarding the instruction of students with disabilities, seems more promising as leaders and staff members work together. As special education supervisors commit to working intimately with their staff, their management of the schools should run smoothly as well.

Organizational Management

A supervisor leads and manages in a way that contributes to the productivity of the job site. The special education supervisor should manage their staff in a way that ensures long-lasting positive results. Birnbaum (2006) notes “decisions can be made by groups at the lowest level in an organization” (p.32). In this respect, the supervisor could utilize the expertise of all staff members involved in the education of the students with disabilities. DiPaola et al. (2004) add everyone has input matters. This gives an opportunity for a distribution of leadership at all levels of the organization in the spirit of collaboration. Although there is one leader, staff members could share control over the processes. The special education supervisor must set the tone for this structure; otherwise, it is unlikely to happen. Staying abreast of the matters within the organization by means of ongoing collaborations would give the supervisor the change to do what is right by students and staff (Birnbaum, 2006).

DiPaola et al. (2004) decided that schools formed by models of collaboration and organizational leadership work more effectively than those that have controlling ranks. It seems that a leader with more of an authoritative style would fare better participating in a hierarchy. By concentrating on practicing a collaborative

leadership style, instead of control, special education supervisors will build an organization of productive staff members. In order for the staff members to continue to put their best into their work, special educators must be careful in handing the relationships they have maintained.

Staff Support

While forming the perception of an enjoyable environment, special education supervisors should work on establishing strong, meaningful relationships to induce collaboration. These relationships can start with a foundation of understanding. Walther-Thomas and DiPaola (2003) stress by understanding the staff's demands and needs, leaders can provide the necessary support that would result in a reduction of stress and an improvement in job satisfaction. Depending on the situation, staff members should know when their supervisor is approachable. This can be hard without establishing relationships. Relationships based on optimism, trust, openness, and respect provide a foundation for collaboration (Billingsley, 2005).

It is also important for special education supervisors to have good interpersonal skills (Birnbaum, 2006). The staff members need a leader that will listen attentively to their opinions (DiPaola et al., 2004). Ongoing dialogue and sharing among teachers and administrators helps to build relational networks needed to reach the goals of a special education program (Walther-Thomas & DiPaola, 2003). Birnbaum (2006) insists that bad morale can interfere with the relationship between staff members and the special education supervisor, but the interpersonal skills of the supervisor can turn those problems around. In turn, using the collaborative leadership style fosters positive relationships resulting in better job performance of all those responsible for educating students with disabilities.

Conclusion

After careful considerations, it is determined that practicing a collaborative leadership style compliments the characteristics needed of a special education supervisor. Staff members are more likely to become motivated to serve their students with the highest quality if they are satisfied with their work environment and relationships with administration. Students with disabilities ultimately benefit from this, as do the rest of the stakeholders involved in their service delivery. Although the collaborative leadership style seemed to work best, several questions arise that warrant further investigations.

These questions should help to reveal a need to continue studying leadership styles in regards to special education programs. Traditionally, if special education supervisors used the authoritative leadership style to enforce procedures and rules associated with service delivery and planning, does it mean the collaborative leader will allow services for students with disabilities to be flexible when a staff member questions a procedure? Because of the meetings supervisors and staff

members conduct concerning the implementation of student services, is it safe to think every staff member will continually adhere to the federal laws and guidelines? It is the special education supervisors' duty to maintain their collaborative leadership style while enforcing the specific guidelines to serving the students primarily. Staff members should enjoy and be productive in their settings, but not at the expense of the students' education.

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