

Frames We Live By: Metaphors for the Cohort

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Abstract

Members of Auburn University's educational leadership program at the doctoral level have created a new framework for learning and sharing knowledge, experience, and support. This framework is shared among the doctoral candidates in the form of series of core classes called "doctoral cohort." This paper captures the essence of the educational leadership doctoral cohort program at Auburn University, Alabama, by describing the doctoral cohort experience as viewed through Bolman's and Deal's (1993) four leadership frames: political, structural, human resource, and symbolic. Furthermore, this essay puts forth metaphors within each frame in order to underscore the value of the cohort experience.

Introduction

An integral part of the university's educational leadership program is the Doctoral Educational Leadership Seminar. It began in 1989 as an effort to allow part-time doctoral students to gain full-time residency status. Students attended seminar classes for five succeeding quarters, beginning in the summer and ending the next summer. The original aim of the seminar was to increase collaborative student practices and to allow those in the leadership doctoral program to learn from the experiences of other seminar members.

The Educational Leadership Program was restructured in 1996 and the result was described as "A Journey from Organization to Community" (Kochan et al., 1999). The Doctoral Educational Leadership Seminar, like other aspects of the leadership program, underwent content and contextual changes resulting from the department's restructuring. Further research in 1998, focusing specifically on the students' doctoral seminar experiences from 1992–1997, reinforced the need for content and contextual changes (Kochan et al., 1999). Due to careful course refinements, the Doctoral Educational Leadership Seminar has matured and is now a required part

of the core curriculum for all doctoral students in the Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology Department. In short, the "cohort seminar" has become a leadership laboratory where members turn theory into practice.

Purpose

The authors of this paper personally experienced the cohort seminar as a professional and personal life-changing occasion. This inspired the writers to create an essay that serves as a think piece and captures the essence of the educational leadership doctoral cohort. In order to do this, this essay will describe the doctoral cohort experience as viewed through Bolman's and Deal's (1993) four leadership frames: political, structural, human resource, and symbolic. Furthermore, this essay will put forth metaphors within each frame to "highlight and make coherent our ... activities" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 232-233).

Frames and the Cohort

Members of Auburn University's educational leadership program at the doctoral level have created a new framework for learning and sharing knowledge, experience, and support. This framework is shared among the doctoral candidates in

the form of core classes called the “doctoral cohort” program. The doctoral cohort program is not a single class, it is a series of doctoral cohort seminars that, once begun, is not open to any student except one who enrolled as part of the cluster of students within the first class of the cohort seminar series. In this way, all student members within a particular seminar start the cohort program at about the same stage of doctoral study and share common goals as they jointly travel toward program completion.

Generally, a new cohort seminar series begins two to three times annually and consists of three successive semesters of coursework and the cohort classes engage individuals to participate in a group setting. However, cohort participants grow beyond being a group, they become a team. According to Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (1999, p. 365), members’ evolution from group to team is evident when certain attitudes become obvious. It is readily apparent to all involved that cohort members’ shared experiences lead to the transition from group to team as members gain a strong sense of common identification, a strong sense of common goals, and begin to envision personal growth as best achieved through high task interdependence while members gravitate toward using their own personal expertise by taking on specialized roles within the team that contribute to common goals—in short, they solidify into an interdependent team of mutually supporting friends and colleagues.

The philosophy of cohort is quite different from that of a traditional college class. Each member’s role within the group is not defined as student, teacher, coach, mentor, etc.; instead, each member fulfills all of these roles and much more. Within the cohort, students are not just receptacles of knowledge they are interdependent team members that are creators of knowledge. Using Schubert’s (1986) description, they are people who “interact with their environment, derive knowledge from it, and use that knowledge to [further] contribute ...” (p. 178). “While students, faculty, and mentoring practitioners create new knowledge, all are also obliged to disseminate that knowledge with members of the learning commu-

nity” (Twale, et al., n.d., p. 12). Therefore, cohort members are referred to as a “Community of Learners.” In order to gain a complete understanding about this community, the authors have described the doctoral cohort experience as viewed through Bolman’s and Deal’s (1993) four leadership frames.

The Political Frame

Any time people come together to interact, whether it is in a college class, a factory, or a party, their activities are influenced by political forces and they act within the political frame. When referring to the political frame, it brings to one’s mind thoughts about power, who among the group holds the power, and how competing interests are tabled so that someone with ultimate power over the group can choose the priority of those interests. This is true for the members of the doctoral cohort who come together as a result of prior planning by the cohort professors and the academy in general. As a starting point, when each new seminar begins, by default the professor is the ultimate holder of power. At this point, students see the professor as the class authority and the one with the power to assign a desirable final grade. The political framework of the doctoral cohort, however, does not continue to follow this typical power-to-powerless relationship. Within a few minutes of the start of the first class on the first day of doctoral cohort, students realize that each of them share a power-among-equals relationship, a collegiality among cohorts. The professor empowers students to also be professors and mentors to the group and to rely on and share their own personal experiences, values, and beliefs to enhance the group’s understanding about a wide range of educational and leadership topics.

The relationship between cohort students and their professors is best described by metaphor. Metaphorically, the professor is a tour guide, not the king or queen of the class. Each student in the class may have an idea of his or her final destination but enlists the help of the tour guide for tips about the terrain, landmarks, directions, alternative paths, how to secure transportation, how to

learn and cope with the local culture, and so on. The tour guide's tasks may range from occasionally providing detailed instructions to just listening to an individual think aloud about his or her ideal trip. The tour guide is experienced and knows the lay of the land, and, the tour guide consults all members of the class to raise the level of awareness about the trip and destinations. Therefore, the political frame in a cohort does not adhere to the normal idea of having authority concentrated at the top with lower-level members competing for scarce resources and power.

The Structural Frame

Members of the cohort work within a structural framework. Within this frame, structures serve to facilitate the organization's operation. The structural frame "emphasizes goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships. Structures ... are designed to fit an organization's environment" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 13). Many elements of each cohort class are structured and carefully planned prior to the course start date. These include a time, date, and location for the first meeting, specific assignments and tasks that should be assigned or negotiated among cohort members, and overall goals. When the cohort class meets for the first time, more structural aspects are negotiated, not directed. Cohort members agree upon which dates and times best fit their schedules for future meetings. Members discuss and agree upon locations for the meetings and individuals within the group take on specialized roles to coordinate with outside agencies so that meetings can be held in special off-campus locations that enhance learning, sharing, and socialization. Cohort members discuss the goals and determine structures to meet those goals, including the coordination of guest speakers for future classes.

One structured activity decided upon by the group members is a "Community of Learners" project. This project has several aims. It cultivates cohesion within the cohort and compels members to work together as a team to accomplish the project successfully. It also obliges each member to emerge as a leader for some part of the project.

Finally, it gives to the community—this is a community service project. It allows cohort students to use their special talents while building a sense of community. A specific example of one community of learners' project will be discussed later in this essay.

The structural frame concept of the cohort is best described by metaphor. Metaphorically, the cohort's structural framework is as a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of a city block. The ground-level outside frame that delineates the physical borders of the cohort, and therefore the puzzle, is provided by the prior planning and guidance of the academy and cohort professors. However, each member of the cohort fashions how his or her part of the puzzle interlocks with the other pieces. Each member decides what type of building (or structure) he or she will contribute to the city block and how that building will co-exist and function to enhance the overall design and purpose of the puzzle. Some buildings are tall and impressively captivating while some are observed by the casual onlooker as small but in fact have huge underground basements that house wonderful treasures that are readily and freely shared throughout the community. Some buildings have very specialized functions such as a fire station or a city hall while others are multi-faceted such as a shopping mall or a flea market. The end result is more than just a city block, it is an interdependent community where the talents of each component are multiplied when used in combination with the talents of the team; it is a community of learners.

The Human Resource Frame

Members organized into the educational leadership doctoral cohort work within a human resource frame. "The human resource frame... sees an organization as much like an extended family, inhabited by individuals who have needs, feelings, prejudices, skills, and limitations" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 14). Therefore, the metaphor for this frame is apparent from the outset. The cohort members are as siblings within a family.

Metaphorically, and as stated earlier, the cohort family members that start the cohort together are kept together as a group in the follow-

on cohort classes that extend for over one year—this builds the relationship into a cohort family of siblings. Over the course of time they are together, siblings learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. Siblings share honest feedback with each other about their performance during presentations and leadership tasks that are carried out on behalf of the group. Journaling becomes an important avenue of expression, and reflections are shared among the cohort so members can learn, comment, and even disagree with stated points of view while offering alternative reasonings. This type of healthy disagreement is only possible because of the closeness of family members—the family depends upon open and honest dialogue in order to mature. Each sibling compiles an autobiography and assembles a collection of artifact evidence that increases self-awareness and group-awareness about who the individual is, where he or she has been, what he or she has done, and what he or she desires to do. Artifacts also serve to remind the family about the talents each individual member brings to the cohort and how each individual member's strengths are important to the family. Over time each family member matures and often emulates the desirable traits and strengths of other siblings within the family. In fact, siblings mentor each other both informally and formally and a major emphasis of the cohort experience is for each member to seek out mentors that facilitate personal and professional growth and to identify personal and professional goals and to formulate a formal mentoring plan; therefore, each family member must think about what he or she wants to do upon growing up and moving out from the family. Siblings also learn how to employ the family as a social support network. The cohort and the family never end. One may grow up and move away, but he or she can always call on a sibling for support and is always available when a sibling needs support. The writers of this article were faculty and student members of the doctoral cohort for 2001-2002, and although these members have graduated, moved to new positions, and are no longer co-located, the 2001-2002 doctoral cohort is still alive and intact. Members of a family continue to forever respect

the family and to help family members be successful throughout the balance of time.

The Symbolic Frame

Another important frame from which cohort members operate is the Symbolic Frame. According to Bolman and Deal (1997, p. 14), "It sees organizations as cultures, propelled more by rituals, ceremonies ..." and so on. This frame deals with traditions, beliefs, and symbols that create emotional connections. According to Bolman and Deal (1997), leaders can use this avenue to create a sense of community. As simple as it sounds, having potlucks, holiday parties, game-day get-togethers and so on, serve as effective ceremonies that bring the individuals together as a team of associates, colleagues, and friends.

The relationship among cohort members (all cohort students and professors) is best described by metaphor. Metaphorically, the cohort is a collaboration of comrades. These comrades approach each class assembly not as a mandatory meeting but rather as a social reunion of friends. Comrades prepare and bring everything from main-course dishes to snacks, deserts, and drinks for the meetings. They save up their best jokes to tell in the gathering. These comrades even plan a host of social activities outside the class time so they can spend more time together.

Cohort friends work with each other to establish their identity within the community as contributors. The doctoral cohort for 2001-2002 did this by centering their community of learners project around the social interaction of cooking. Comrades collaborated to devise a cookbook that could garner enough funds to benefit the local community while sharing the enjoyment of fine cooking and eating. The team agreed that the best avenue to success was to employ members to do specialized roles based on their experience and desires. Therefore, since one member had experience in coordinating cookbook publishing, he took on that role. All cohort comrades pooled, tested, and shared their favorite recipes. Members who were skilled typists went to their keyboards and skillfully compiled the collection of recipes into a single database. One cohort comrade employed

his talent as an editor. Various members reviewed the near-finished product and last-minute changes were made. Finally, through collaboration and consensus, the recipes took shape as a professionally designed cookbook entitled, *Community of Learners Cohort Cookery: Auburn University's Food for Thought* (2002). Once the cookbook was back from the printers, the comrades divided the books among themselves and fanned out to share the workload of selling them. Through their collaborative work, nearly \$1500.00 was raised and all the profits for the cookbook were donated to projects underway to benefit the local community.

It is often easy to recognize individuals who are cohort comrades. This is because they eat together, have socials together, learn together, assist the community together, and even take trips together. Recently, comrades (students and professors) from the 2001-2002 doctoral cohort, coordinated a trip to attend the annual American Education Research Association (AERA) conference. While there, comrades attended seminars and shared their days and evenings together. And again, Auburn University cohort comrades were easy to recognize: while not attending meetings, they all wore the same style Auburn University shirts. And, thanks to planning by one of the cohort professors, each shirt had printed upon it the words, "Doctoral Cohort, 2001-2002." Comrades cheerfully came together under this banner and were proud to display their membership within the group.

Multi-framing

It is easy to see that the activities shared by doctoral cohort members can be straightforwardly framed under Bolman's and Deal's (1993) four leadership frames. However, leadership and social interaction among people is never isolated within a single frame. When peering into the political frame to see that the professor's authority is structured so it is delegated in a way that empowers all class members, what we see is more than the political framework. We also see the structural framework that shows an organization with a flattened organizational chart where the tour guide and the tourist are nearly equal stake-

holders of the cohort. Together, classmates and faculty navigate the process of creating knowledge and becoming architects of their structure for building the community of learners. And, like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of a city block, the members of the cohort are interlocked, politically and structurally. Within the structure, each member has specialized roles and responsibilities and each provides support for the other and for the cohort as a whole. Therefore, one cannot look purely at the political or structural framework of the group without detecting that much of the leadership strength of the group lies in the human resource frame. The cohort's political interaction and structural support binds them together as a cohort family of siblings. Within the family of siblings, the flattened organization promotes lateral lines of communication that are key to making things happen at the lowest level through friendly ideas and common interests. Often times, much more can be accomplished more quickly and easily by using this informal structure than by using formal structures often associated with traditional college courses. Of course, just as siblings often share the same family name as a symbol of their blood relationship, these cohort comrades also are symbolically bound together as friends. They proudly wear tee-shirts with their cohort logo so all can notice that they are comrades, all taking the journey with their expert tour guides, all taking part in an evolution of structure that will influence how and where they make their contributions to the community, to the family, and to their friends.

Summarizing the Cohort Through Frames

The Auburn University doctoral cohort for the educational leadership program is not a typical graduate class where students show up on time, draw knowledge from the professor, do assignments, and then go back home to their individual lives. Rather than that, the cohort classmates organize the class, draw knowledge from each other, create knowledge, and become a part of each other's lives. Rather than requiring rigid assignments as milestones of students' personal accomplishments, professors encourage innova-

tion, risk taking, decision-making, and group interaction to accomplish group goals. This is not to say that the course requirements are weak or not well thought out—quite the contrary. The professors act as skillful tour guides to ensure all students experience the necessary elements of the trip. The trip is centered around individual and group tasks, a community of learners project, reading, reflection and journaling, autobiographical artifacts, leadership studies, individual and group presentations, building a personal mentoring plan, and learning how to lead one's peers. The cohort is not just a class, it is a relationship. It is a relationship among key stakeholders on a knowledge expedition with expert tour guides; it is a relationship among key interlocking and specialized pieces of a three-dimensional puzzle; it is a relationship of siblings with a common desire to see their family succeed; and, it is a relationship of lifelong friends engaged within a community of lifelong learners.

Emerging Themes

There are several emerging themes that warrant mentioning and remembering as noteworthy observations of the doctoral cohort program. First is empowerment. The cohort power-base is not held by the professor. It is delegated to be shared by all members of the doctoral cohort—a power-among-equals relationship—a collegiality among cohorts. Students are empowered to also be professors and mentors to the group and to rely on and share their own personal experiences, values, and beliefs to enhance the group's understanding about a wide range of educational and leadership topics. Secondly, it is important to note that although the activities shared by cohort members can be framed under any one of Bolman's and Deal's (1993) four leadership frames, it is unrealistic to assume that any activity is limited to one single frame. Leadership and social interaction among people is never isolated within a

single frame. Thirdly, members of the doctoral cohort gained a strong sense of themselves as unique individuals with special knowledge and experiences and as family members of the learning community. Finally, they set up an internal relationship of commitment and capacity for sharing, trusting, inter-reliance, and creation. They have learned the relationship of coexistence and interdependence of self, the learning organization, and the society.

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