The Function of Effective Leadership for Considering Students as Central Stakeholders to Build Real Learner Centered School Environment

Dr. Xiaosong "Eric" Guo[1]

Abstract

Application of business principles to education is not new. The attempt to consider students as central stakeholders to build real learner centered school environment by implementing learning organization model rarely exists. This article explored the possibility of such an assumption. Because of current utilitarian ideology in education and school reform, federal government, state, and district are always seeking for a "quick fix" method, which really goes against an ideal school reform environment building. Therefore, it is absolutely worthy to launch this long term and profound school reform to benefit students through building real learner centered school environment.

Keywords: Effective leadership, Central stakeholders, Real learner centered school environment, Learning organization model

Introduction

What is the purpose of schooling and education? There are two primary but opposing thoughts existing regarding the purpose of school and education. Some organizations created by governors and business leaders, such as the Business Roundtable and Achieve (as cited in Peterson & Taylor, 2009, p. 16) believe that the primary purpose of schools should be to create workers who have skills and personal styles to fill and perform available jobs. Others (Freeman, 2005; Goodlad, 1984; Hodgkinson, 2006; Postman, 1996) believe this outcome is too narrow. For them (as cited in Peterson & Taylor, 2009, p. 17) schools should seek to develop active citizens, helping children develop their own capacity for personal achievement and contributing to society as an active citizen for democracy.

I preferred to combine these two views together with new dimension and strategy. The purpose of schooling and education is developing students to be an active citizen as well as the readiness to be certain of their career paths and to be of the contributor to the society. In order to fulfill this purpose, necessary school reform is imperative. One of the possible attempts is to consider students as central stakeholders to build real learner centered school environment. Some dramatic features can be seen: (1) students engage in school reform actively, (2) applying business principles (learning organization model) in school management successfully, and (3) building real learner centered school environment eventually.

Leadership

Effective leadership from principles, administrators, superintendents, and policy makers plays a role as driving force and catalyst in this process. What is the definition of leadership? From different viewpoints and needs, leadership can really have numerous definitions. As Warren Bennis once said "leadership is like beauty: it is hard to define, but you know it when you see it" (Bennis, 1994, p. 1). Northouse (2006) defined the leadership is "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3).

---

[1] Lynn University (Boca Raton, FL), 3601 N Military Trail, Boca Raton, FL 33431. Email: eric_in_usa@hotmail.com

These theories have both advantages and disadvantages, and sometimes they overlap in some areas. It is true that all of them are still developing, improving, arguing, and hopefully they will be argued and discussed until the end of time. Comparing these leadership theories, a same point can be found about what is leadership on earth. That is how to deal with relations between leaders and followers to achieve an organization's mission.

Leadership vs. management. When talking leadership in organization, another concept, management, should be reviewed as well. The differences between these two concepts always confuse leadership study. They are similar in some ways, but also very different in some ways. Rost (1991) drew a clearer picture to differentiate leadership and management, and the main differences can be seen easily. Rost also declared that "leadership as good management" (p. 145). He defined management as "management is an authority relationship between at least one manager and one subordinate who coordinate their activities to produce and sell particular goods and/or services" (p.145), while leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (p. 102). Four dramatic points were pulled out by Rost between management and leadership: influence, active followers, intend real changes, and mutual purposes. This shows clearly that leadership means do the right thing, while management means do things right (Northouse, 2006). *The art of leadership: Ability to influence and change.* The art of leadership represents the ability that leaders have to influence and change, which mean persuade and influence followers adopting necessary changes to turn the organization's mission into reality smoothly.

Leadership is an art that leaders use power resources to influence the whole team. In this process, all members are not passive subordinates but active followers. Moreover, both leaders and followers intend real changes that reflect mutual purposes. Some scholars made similar conclusions about the importance of influence in leadership process. Lussier (1990) indicated that "leadership is the process on influencing employees to work toward the achievement of objectives" (p. 101). Robbins (1993) believed that leadership is "the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals" (p. 60).

Leadership is the art of change, and the change is the purpose and process in an organization. Just as Daft (2005) argued that leadership is now changing from "stability, control, competition, uniformity, self-centered, and hero" to "change or crisis management, empowerment, collaboration, diversity, high purpose, and humble" (p. 8). Leaders have to understand why change is necessary for effective leadership. Change can help reshape school operations to meet the students' needs well. Change equals stable mission plus flexible and optional strategies. Leaders should have the ability to create mission and strategy for the team. This is the leaders' responsibility to put forward right directions for the team and then align mission with feasible strategy. Besides influence and change, good leaders also need to have the talent to explain the mission and strategy to all followers clearly (Parrish, 2006), because all participants will be directly impacted on whether the change will be successful or not. As Bennis (1994) suggested "leaders are people who are able to express themselves fully" (p. 3).

The Learning Organization Model

People want to learn, because they need to do so. To make something new and to do something that they never did in the past, that is learning. Human beings can learn just like grasses and flowers can grow. When people really want to do something, they will start learning, and when people really desire to create something new, they will try every way to reach there. Actually, this "try every way" is the process of learning. In the learning process, many experiences can be found. Moreover, if these experiences could be organized systematically, they will become to knowledge. Knowledge, as mentioned by Senge (1990), is the capacity to take effective actions. The key points of learning are to expand these effective actions and the capabilities in innovation. An organization's essential quality is built on the continuous learning capacities (Senge, 1990).

Senge (1990) put forward the concept of the learning organization for continuous learning in organizations. In the matter of fact, these five disciplines are a lifelong program of study and practice to facilitate learning. They are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. *Personal mastery.* Senge (1990) pointed out that personal mastery is "learning to expand our personal capacity to create the results we most desire, and creating an organizational environment which encourages all its members to develop themselves toward the goals and purposes they choose" (p. 6). This principle is the starting step for the entire organizational learning process. Human resources (students, faculties, and staff members) are the most dynamic part in an organization (school), because the organization is made by individuals. Bakke (2005) "felt strongly that people should be able to bring many of their beliefs about life into an organization" (p. 27), a similar description that personal mastery shows. The kernel of personal mastery is that everyone is supposed to have initiative in the organizational learning progress.

Mental models. Senge (1990) defined mental models as "reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world, and seeing how they shape our actions and decisions" (p. 6). This step is based on the personal mastery. After the organization leaders (administrators, principles, and superintendents etc.) learn and understand what the results they desire are and how to create an organizational environment, these leaders can encourage followers (students, teachers, and staff members) to develop themselves freely. Throughout this process, all of members will review their viewpoints about what the real school education is, and what the actual internal and external environments they face.

Shared vision. Shared vision is "building a sense of commitment in a group, by developing shared images of the future we seek to create, and the principles and guiding practices by which we hope to get there" (Senge, 1990, p. 6). What is vision? Beach (2005) pointed out the prime responsibility of vision. That is a reasonable story about the organization's future in light of the constraints imposed by its environment and culture. This step is the philosophy about an organization's main reason for existing in society (the purpose of schooling and education). Paine (as cited in Bakke, 2005, p. 31) contended that shared vision constitute an organizational infrastructure that gives an organization its distinctive character and ethos—its moral personality. For organizations, the understanding of the vision may change, but the vision itself is eternal.

Team learning. Senge (1990) recommended the upper level in organizational learning process, team learning. According to Senge, team learning is "transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talents" (p. 6). Team looks like a machine that is made up by individual parts. Each part has its own functions. When putting them together properly, the whole can accomplish more than any single part. If using a formula to show it, that is $1 + 1 > 2$. In this process, leaders are the people who put individual parts together smartly. Good leaders in team learning will not try their best to control everything or make subordinates feel nervous. Bakke (2005) believed that "we learn best when we discuss our work with others, make decisions that matter and find out from others whether what we did was right or wrong" (p. 100).

Systems thinking. Senge (1990) explained it as "a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and inter-relationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us see how to change systems more effectively and to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world" (p. 6). This is the top in the entire organizational learning. Personal mastery can make both leaders and workers improve their capacities freely and fully in innovation and creation in organizational environment. Next, the mental models serve for guiding personal mastery on correct path. The shared vision is helping build fundamental philosophy for an organization's definition of success and social responsibilities. The function of teaming learning is to put all individual parts together to accomplish more. The last step, systems thinking, will review the whole process systematically to get higher progress in new organizational learning cycle.

To sum up, according to Senge (1990), the core of the learning organization "is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connect to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience" (p. 12).

Students in School Reform

Paolo Freire (2001) points out:

For education to occur there must be communication, and dialogue is the cornerstone of communication. Education must involve all parties. It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor attempt to impose that view on them but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their actions, reflects their situation in the world (p. 77).

The process to build real learner centered school environment is complex and dynamic that requires a systemic approach and buy-in of all participants and stakeholders. As central stakeholders, students have subjective experience and perceptions about school and education. They are being affected daily by educational decisions made by adults inside and outside of school. Unequally, compared with the remarkable discourse power that adult stakeholders have, students' voices often go voiceless in the debates regarding school reform.

Zion believes that "as central stakeholders and beneficiaries of the educational system, students should be considered essential participants to any effort to reform educational systems" (2009, p. 133). Studies do exist that show the benefits of including students in change processes (as cited in Zion, 2009, p. 133). These studies found common character that when students are included in school reform process, change does happen. Levin (1999) argues that "education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects" (p. 2).

Levin (2000) names five arguments for including students in education reform:

(1) Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buy-in from all those involved, students no less than teachers;

(2) Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation;

(3) Students' views can help mobilize staff and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform;

(4) Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling;

(5) Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement (pp. 156–157).

These five arguments well demonstrate directly to the students' contribution to school reform, systems change, and reform efforts.

Conclusions and Implications for Education

Application of business principles to education is not new. The attempt to consider students as central stakeholders to build real learner centered school environment by implementing learning organization model rarely exists. This article explored the possibility of such an assumption. The most salient weakness of this proposed model is feasibility. Because of current utilitarian ideology in education and school reform, federal government, state, and district are always seeking for a "quick fix" method, such as replace school principle, re-hire teachers, close and re-open school, till shut down school and move students to other schools. This reality really goes against an ideal school reform environment building. Therefore, even with weakness of feasibility, it is absolutely worthy to launch this long term and profound school reform to benefit students through building real learner centered school environment.

References

Bakke, D. (2005). Joy at work a revolutionary approach to fun on the job. P V G, P.O. Box 70525. Seattle, WA, U.S.A.

Beach, L. (2005). Leadership and the art of change. Thousand Oaks, CA 91320.

Bechtel, D., & Reed, C. (1998). Students as documenters: benefits, reflections and suggestions. NAASP Bulletin, 82, 89-95.

Bennis, W. (1994). On becoming a leader. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Book.

Carrington, S., & Robinson, R. (2006). Inclusive school community: why is it so complex? International Journal of Inclusive Education, 10(4-5), 323-334.

Daft, L. (2005). The leadership experience (3rd ed). Canada: South-Western.

Finn, J., & Checkoway, B. (1998). Young people as competent community builders: a challenge to social work. Social Work, 43(4), 335.

Freire, P. (2001) Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage. Laham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc.

Glendon, M. (1991) Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse. New York: Free Press.

Levin, B. (2000) Putting Students at the Centre in Education Reform. Journal of Educational Change, 1(2), 156-157.

Lincoln, Y. (1995). In search of students' voices. Theory into Practice, 34(2), 88-93.

Lussier, N. (1990). Human relations in organizations. Homewood, IL: Dow Jones Irwin.

Metzger, D. (2004). Rethinking classroom management: teaching and learning with students. Social Studies and the Young Learner, 17(2), 13-15.

Northouse, P. (2006). Leadership: Theory and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

O'Hair, M. J., McLaughlin, J., & Reitzug, U. L. (2000). Foundations of Democratic Education. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Paine, L. (2003). Value shift: Why companies must merge social and financial imperatives to achieve superior performance. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Parrish, A. (2006). Team building. Retrieved from
        http://www.coaching-businesses-to-success.com/team_building.html

Peterson, J., & Taylor, P. (2009). Whole Schooling and the Circle of Courage.

Retrieved from www.wholeschooling.net/WS/WSPress.pdf

Robbins, P. (1993). Organizational behavior, concepts, controversies and applications. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Rost, J. C. (1991). Leadership for the 21st century. New York: Praeger.

Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil participation and pupil perspective: carving a new order of experience. Cambridge Journal of Education, 30(1), 75-89.

Senge, P. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York, New York.

Zion, S. (2009). Systems, stakeholders, and students: including students in school reform. Improving Schools, 12(2), 131-143.