Leadership and Professional Development

Professor Joseph W.M. Kessels, PhD[1]

Introduction

How can educational and other types of organizations bring about a favourable learning environment for staff, where they are continuously able to improve in their professional practice? How do formal leadership and guidance from colleagues influence the learning environment? (Bush, 2011)

Answering these questions requires developing special knowledge about *educational leadership* in the organization (Best, 2006). Such leadership should encourage developing and accommodating professionalism and supporting staff in their instructional and learning activities.

Positional leadership

Our images and views of leadership have been deeply informed over the course of history by perceptions of leaders as heroes, great pioneers and courageous protectors. They are usually seen as strong men. Kings, freedom fighters, heads of state, political heroes and successful entrepreneurs have influenced our interpretations of leadership. Nature abounds with appealing examples, such as the rooster protecting his brood of chickens. His special position, status and power are manifested in his magnificent plumage. The elephant leads her herd. The impressive figure emerging directly from a primal world radiates power and commands respect. The male lion has even become the ruler of the animal kingdom, thanks to his courage and heroism.

Nature often assigns the roles of leader and followers according to gender. During adolescence this is settled by the outcome of heavy fighting that ensures the survival of the fittest. The test of competence in the form of

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physical dominance commands respect from the followers. Among humans this test is somewhat more demanding. The leadership role may be acquired through special attributes, such as relevant knowledge, strategic insight, creating an appealing perspective, promising safety, health and prosperity. Potential leaders will convey such promises convincingly and will describe visible successes to support them wherever possible. The special rank and status, however, need to be legitimated by an exceptional assignment, preferably issued by God or the people. This higher command matters to humans, as the leadership position and the corresponding opportunity to exercise power basically mean that followers forfeit personal freedom. They will not surrender their autonomy to equal fellow citizens or co-workers. Legitimisation coming from some *competent authority* is therefore necessary to claim a leadership role. In our society the constitution serves this purpose or, alternatively, democratic elections, a royal decree, a ministerial decision, as well as resolutions by the Supervisory Board, the Board of Trustees, the shareholders' meeting, or the Executive Board or Executive Committee. Assigning a position of power needs to be prudent, transparent, and as prescribed by the rules, precisely because it curtails other people's freedom of movement.

Distributed leadership

The concept of leadership as is generally observed among political leaders, CEOs, directors, heads of operations, in which their position, status and authority is clearly defined with respect to the followers, deeply imbues our ideas about organizing work and society. Scenes of the chicken coop, the herd of elephants and the family of lions confirm our practices. Other animals relate to their own species differently. The leader is difficult to identify in a school of fish, as it is in a flock of starlings. Still, everything moves quickly and flexibly, giving the impression that they are mutually connected (Van Ginneken, 2009). Researchers at the University of Groningen have tracked basic rules that explain how a school of fish or a flock of birds sticks together (Hemelrijk & Hildenbrandt, 2011). This type of self-organization is based on mutual attraction, a common direction and avoiding collisions.
Additional factors with starlings include upward force, air resistance, gravity and the slope along the curve. The resulting scenes are amazing.

Collaboration between ants is probably still more complex. A formicary is capable of building complex structures, with tunnels, supply rooms, escape routes and air conditioning. The queen is the only ant capable of laying eggs and is thus decisive for the formicary's perpetuation. However, she

does not exercise leadership. The worker ants observe an intricate distribution of tasks and specialization, performed by working together closely. This enables them to deliver exceptional achievements in hunting for food, building their home and surviving in difficult conditions. In addition to the virtues of industrious cooperation and specialised distribution of tasks, several ant species may engage in acts of aggression, such as attacking neighbouring anthills and taking slaves, subsequently condemned to an existence as worker ants.

In the complex collaborative contexts of a school of fish, a flock of birds and ants in their formicary, leadership does not rest with a single powerful representative. Leadership appears to be distributed according to competencies, experience and duties to be performed. Everybody wields influence, although such influence is effective only once the other participants allow it. This type of collaboration in nature may appear very remote from us, especially when it involves large groups of starlings, pigeons, fish and ants. Nowadays, however, we have become intimately familiar with *communities, crowds* and *clouds* that have unique dynamics for exchanging information, learning and influencing without any hierarchy. Social media offer interesting examples: especially Twitter, which is indeed named after chirping birds .

Remarkably, when exploring the leadership phenomenon we readily embrace scenes of nature featuring the leader as a powerful, courageous, impressive, heroic pioneer. He (!) generally determines the course toward a better life and ensures that his followers are safe and protected in the process. Current employment agreements are still based on this notion: the employer provides a safe working environment and a salary at market rates. In exchange, submissive compliance with authority is expected from employees. This is the legal meaning of the Dutch terms that denote 'being a good employer' and 'being a good employee' (Dutch Civil Code, Title 7.10; Employment agreement, Art. 611).

Educational leadership in professional space

Curiosity about leadership in the organization resurfaces in the quest for answers to the question as to which circumstances encourage employees to pursue professional development. Which leadership style causes them to enhance their expertise? Can employees be obliged to make long-term investments in their professional competence, and can such an obligation work? How do you organize staff learning? In Human Resource Development the objective is to initiate and support formal and informal

learning processes on the job, aimed at promoting individual competence, internal cooperation, and mutual knowledge development (Harrison & Kessels, 2004).

Is individual, positional leadership of the CEO or manager the most important factor in this type of learning and promotion of expertise, or do elements of a distributed leadership culture come into play as well?

Influencing upon request: claiming, granting and awarding leadership

Leadership is not a static state connected to a person holding a specific office or position. Depending on the situation, we may alternate between performing leadership activities and behaving like a follower. Such a leadership identity, however, cannot be taken for granted. You may claim it, but if others in the same situation do not acknowledge, grant or award such leadership, problems will arise. An instructor will have difficulty maintaining order, a policeman will lose his authority, and the ambulance medic will be unable to do his work. Disagreement within a team setting about leader and follower identities will give rise to conflicts. If teachers find themselves unable to launch leadership activities within their professional space – in the sense of influencing the structure of their work and working relationships with their colleagues – they will be unable to do their jobs and will no longer develop their competencies.

DeRue and Ashford (2010) have described in detail the dynamics of leader and follower identities, devoting considerable attention to the reciprocal process of claiming and granting the leadership role. If people regard leadership as a shared, mutual process, they are more likely to try to claim space for leadership activities than if they perceive it as a hierarchy, which allows for only one leader. If the members of the group have a common view of the characteristics of distributed leadership, the claiming and granting processes will be smoother as well. In the event of vast differences in perceptions, leadership practices will depend more on individual theories, and tensions and conflicts over leadership will ensue.

With a view toward developing competencies among professionals and knowledge productivity at educational and other organizations, additional review of practices related to distributed leadership activities is worthwhile. Does a professional space that accommodates leadership activities flexibly provide a learning environment conducive to competency development?

Professional space, autonomy and job requirements

If we view professional space as the domain where staff in conjunction with the organization have a say in structuring and performing the work and in organizing their own professional enrichment, then we address important motivating factors for achieving high-level performance of complex tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Such professional space gives staff the means of control to meet high standards in task performance. When performing complicated tasks, expanding such means of control will reduce stress and encourage work motivation and learning (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Having means of control is a type of autonomy and a source of professional enrichment. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), after resolving stress factors, such as fatigue, exhaustion and cynicism at work, have devised similar recommendations and identify factors such as engagement, challenge, inspiration, social support and enjoyment as the basis for personal growth, learning and professional development (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Human Resource Development as a source of inspiration

If we relate the insights from the domain of Human Resource Development – training, teaching and enriching staff in their work setting – to bringing about a positive learning environment, abundant resources are already available:

- If we are designing interventions for professional development, we might adopt a relational approach that will lead to shared views about the heart of the matter we aim to address, and which course of action might be suitable (Kessels, 1999; Kessels & Plomp, 1999).
- The landscape of sustainable professional development should support a varied number of instructional functions, comprising not only job-related knowledge, but also reflection, communication, self-regulation and strengthened confidence and self-efficacy; in addition to calm and stability, a measure of creative turmoil is desirable for innovation (Kessels, 1996a, 1996b; Lakerveld, 2005; Stam, 2007a, 2007b; Van Lakerveld, 2005).
- If we hope to reap the benefits of professional development through improvements and innovations, staff members will need to take the initiative (Van der Waals, 2001).
- Rather than the strategic plans of the school, the extent to which teachers consider the activities to be meaningful and compatible with their need for personal growth are a powerful incentive for professional enrichment. Social interactions with their colleagues

are more important than guidance from the management in this process (Hensel, 2010).

- In realising innovation projects, steering, forcing and exerting pressure by threatening to enforce accountability is useless. Knowledge productivity is more likely to arise via subtle temptation, in which staff members seek each other out and cultivate talents, based on a strong personal drive and dedication to a given matter. Mutual attraction and inspiration are not easily planned (Kessels, 2001).
- Achieving breakthroughs on tough, urgent matters requires a clear initiator and driver, who is deeply involved in the topic concerned. Within the time pressure that often imposes the urgency, moments of calm should be included to enable reflection. Linking up and building bridges with circles outside one's own discipline is often a condition for achieving such a breakthrough. A measure of freedom and autonomy to experiment are facilitating factors. Direction and control from supervisors is of little use. The social process of learning and innovating is not always smooth. Sometimes the process will reach an impasse, and endless discussions deplete everybody's energies. Suspending the talks and embarking on a joint activity to produce tangible results often yields surprising breakthroughs. Bonds between the members of innovative teams emerge especially from mutual admiration for each other's craftsmanship and experience. This subtle combination of subject matter expertise and domain-specific knowledge on the one hand and social competencies for promoting learning on the other is decisive for the success of innovative teams (De Jong, 2010; Kessels, Verdonschot, & Jong, 2011; Verdonschot, 2009).

Is accountability for performance agreements compatible with improvement through inspired ownership?

Whoever believes that work quality needs to improve is likely to pursue this objective by setting goals, providing direction, monitoring, assessing achievements, adjusting deviations, reinforcing the knowledge base, arranging continuing education and registering craftsmanship.

This leads to a clash between two worlds that are difficult to reconcile: the talent of inspired ownership and performing under pressure imposed by others.

In educational settings this tension is clearly discernible. In 2001 under President G.W. Bush legislation was passed entailing massive educational reform, known as *No Child Left Behind* (Congress Federal Government USA, 2001). The main objectives were to raise the general performance by primary and secondary school students, improve the quality of teachers and give each child, regardless of his or her social background, access to quality education. These reforms included a very rigid system of accountability. Every school had to demonstrate annual improvement through higher scores on standardised tests: the *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP) system. Sanctions for falling behind included being publicly designated as a low-performing school, funding cuts, and dismissal of teachers with low scores. Teachers are required to meet educational requirements. Schools were only allowed to apply evidence based teaching methods, proven through scientific research. Practical experience, interviews, case studies, action research and other types of qualitative data collection do not count as valid evidence.

Ten years down the road, views are deeply divided on this sweeping educational reform. Major subjects of disagreement are the increase in social inequality, because low-performing schools tend to be those with disadvantaged students, who thus bear the brunt of the AYP system. In districts where there already was a shortage of teachers, this situation has often worsened. The constant focus on test scores in language skills and mathematics has given rise to *teaching to the test*, subsequently eroding the educational curriculum. On the international comparative PISA study of skills among 15 year-old students (OECD, 2010a), the United States has dropped from 15th place in reading (2000) to 17th (2009) and in mathematics from 24th place (2003) to 30th (2009). The Obama administration is presently revising the reform measures, reducing the emphasis on continuous testing and accountability and allowing more opportunities for customised assistance.

Sharply contrasting with the American *No Child Left Behind* system, the Finnish model revolves around highly educated teachers. Standardised testing is far less important. School is not only a place for developing mathematics and language skills. It also provides for care and wellbeing, including dental services, emotional guidance and a nutritious lunch (free of charge). Teachers often team up to devise educational improvements and to draft and implement plans for customised approaches to serve more advanced students and those requiring additional support.

Craftsmanship, autonomy and professional discretion make teaching one of the most highly appreciated occupations in Finland (Sahlberg, 2012). The Finnish educational system has obtained the highest scores in the international PISA study for years (OECD, 2010b).

Performance or Development?

The sharp contrast between the U.S. and the Finnish educational systems once again raises question as to which leadership practices best match a professional space, where teachers and students may cultivate the talent present. Does educational improvement involve rigid reliance on performance indicators, or are recalcitrant issues best addressed from a learning culture, in which teachers, headmasters and administrators elaborate new, unconventional approaches and carefully try them out? Here, too, a classical HRD theme surfaces, known to us as the *performance* and *development* paradigms (Swanson & Holton, 2009). In drives to improve performance, the result is identified in advance, for example higher scores for mathematics and language skills, lower dropout rates, higher parent participation.

Rigidly controlling and enforcing accountability for performance targets obviously reflects forceful leadership. Output will increase in the short term. After three or four years, however, this growth will stagnate, despite additional investments in money and effort and application of improved procedures. We observed this process in the major educational reform in the United Kingdom (Fullan, 2005). In this system of numerical accountability, shared attribution of meaning has been obscured, ultimately leading to unintended and distorted incentives and undermining the inspired craftsmanship of occupational practitioners. Alienation, exhaustion, cynicism, depression and burnout are imminent.

The Social Development Council [Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling] (RMO, 2011) has learned from the recent credit crunch. In addition to showing how steering mechanisms relating to mortgage approval and the bonus system have perverse effects with disastrous consequences, the council has noted comparable dangers in healthcare, welfare and education. The RMO easily associates this with a similarly biased focus on financial results in professional education programmes and the overriding importance of national standardised test scores. The *performance* paradigm encourages schools to achieve the highest possible, demonstrable result, assessed according to selected predefined targets, preferably requiring as few resources as possible. The explicit emphasis on

numerical yields in education leads to a sense of alienation among teachers and students alike.

A constant focus on extrinsic objectives will ultimately be demoralizing to occupational practitioners, depriving professionals of the autonomy to operate according to their own judgement. If this focus is moreover perceived as biased or unfair, confidence will diminish in whoever applies such a focus.

Cultivating talent is more than delivering quantifiable achievements. Staff members want to be involved in cultivating self-confidence, creativity, perseverance, independence and curiosity among their students. We believe that respect, a sense of responsibility and willingness to participate in dialogue are important objectives. These learning outcomes cannot be expressed in scores on conventional, standardised tests.

A learning environment for knowledge productivity

The specific form of the answer to the question of how to encourage learning and development is not entirely clear yet. Working toward the solution is above all a learning process that allows new, varied expertise to crystallise. It is a form of knowledge production in a specific context, to which various concerned parties contribute: gathering relevant information about a current issue, developing new competencies in this respect and subsequently applying them, thereby gradually improving and perhaps radically innovating the educational situation (Kessels, 2001).

Such a knowledge productive approach uses the expertise present, relates it to the knowledge and experiences of others, aims to achieve breakthroughs on tough issues for which no satisfactory solution has been available thus far. The ultimate benefit is twofold: on the one hand there are the actual breakthroughs, improvements and innovations, while on the other hand there is also a benefit consisting of increased competence to tackle such issues more quickly and intelligently in the future. This view of professional development connects learning with working, takes the individual competence of teachers to the next level and reinforces professionalism in the occupation as a whole.

Knowledge productivity, learning and development dedicated to improvement and innovation of educational practice are activities that take place in a social context, in networks and communities. It is more than accumulating knowledge and is based on a growth concept that has

evolved gradually through experimenting, achieving successes and learning from trial and error for the next round. It is a way of promoting expertise that will ideally take place in professional settings and will undergo qualitative improvement, as more colleagues respectively claim and assign each other leadership traits. It is a form of competence development that is difficult to reconcile with the rational and strictly goal-oriented model underlying a performance approach; this is especially true, if these goals are imposed transactionally, regardless of the individual professionals expected to achieve them.

Analysis of student achievements similarly reveals that the outcome of imposing performance targets together with public accountability requirements will be favourable, only if the system of accountability entails a high degree of autonomy. In countries where schools have considerable input in educational content and in how such content is imparted and subsequently assessed, students will perform better (OECD, 2010b). This is a delicate interplay between meaningful use of professional space and accounting for the returns. Fullan describes this as: *intelligent accountability* (Fullan, 2005).

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