Enabling Workplace: Fad or Opportunity?

Workshop Presented by

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Fifth Annual Educational Leadership Conference
University of Wollongong
16 February 2006
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Introduction
Surrounded by environmental turbulence, intense competition and accountability, and discontinuous change the management of modern organizations has become intensely complex, complicated and challenging. The technological and knowledge revolution, the rise of the ‘customer, and the push for value for money, the demand for greater workplace democracy and reward, has prompted leaders to search for better and more innovative leadership practices.

There is therefore a notable shift in the way leadership is conceptualised and practised. There is a marked disdain for the traditional control, coercive, and manipulative, patriarchal (Block, 1993) to a more facilitative leadership paradigm. Distributive Leadership, the theme of this conference, is one such emerging paradigm. Distributive leadership is not another passing fad, fancy or cynical attempt to fob off work to others. According to Kouzes & Posner (1987), collaboration and ‘strengthening others’ (empowerment) enable people to act. I believe that it is empowerment which creates the seedbed of collaboration. If appropriately exercised, it can help create a more enabling and fulfilling workplace. Empowerment is at the very heart of its success.

Drawing on relevant literature and experience, I contend that in enabling workplaces leaders distribute leadership through genuine empowerment, space for growth and mutual responsibility. In this interactive workshop, participants will also share their ‘take’ on Distributive Leadership and offer their suggestions on how it can create more authentic and enabling workplaces.
My case on empowering distributive leadership is bedded in three intermingling realities.

Definition:
Distributed leadership implies a redistribution of power and a realignment of authority within the organization. It means creating the conditions in which people work together and learn together, where they construct and refine meaning leading to a shared purpose or set of goals. It implies inter-dependency rather than dependency. (Harris, A. 2004.)

Interdependence or Solo Flights
1. The values underpinning distributive leadership are consistent with recent movements in education such as Teacher Leadership, Parallel Leadership (Crowther et al. 2002), Shared Leadership, Authentic Leadership( Duignan & Bhindi, 1997; Bhindi & Duignan, 1997) and the Learning Community (Senge, 1990).

In contrast to heroic or apex leadership (Bradford & Cohen, 1998), the enactment, nurturing and sustainability of a distributive leadership culture is very much connected to the commitment and willingness of leaders at all levels to distribute power and help others to exercise personal and professional responsibility, grow and succeed.

Crowther et al’s argument for parallel leadership is pertinent.
Parallel leadership engages teacher leaders and administrator leaders in collaborative action, while at the same time encouraging the fulfilment of their individual capabilities, aspirations and responsibilities. It leads to strengthened alignment between the school’s vision and the school’s teaching and learning practices. It facilitates the development of a professional learning community, culture building and schoolwide approaches to teaching and learning. (Crowther et al. 2001, p.73).

Proponents of distributive/facilitative/authentic leadership contend that no leader/manager, no matter how competent, efficient or enthusiastic can operate on their own and succeed. They need the support and commitment of others as well.
Leaders know that they cannot do it alone. It takes partners to get extraordinary things done in organizations. Leaders build teams with spirit and cohesion, teams that feel like family. They actively involve others in planning and give them discretion to make their own decisions. Leaders make others feel like owners, not hired hands. (Kouzes & Posner. 1987, p.131).

**Learning or Muddling Through**

2. Secondly, given the rapidity of organizational change and obsolescence, many leaders accept that only the versatile, vibrant, and flexible workplaces will thrive and survive and remain relevant. Such organizations continuously learn, develop, renew, innovate and improvise. They are both adaptive and proactive. Despite celebrating and nourishing their enduring/foundational values they are not allergic to risk taking and change. (Senge, 1990.)

**Made-to-order or Off-the shelf**

3. Thirdly, some commentators (Bhindi, 2004) argue for better fit/ congruence between organizational distinctiveness and leadership practice and management structures. They argue that those who manage people - especially professionals - would do well to understand the nature and purpose of the organizations they lead and the kind of people who work for them, and the values they espouse, their compulsions and hang-ups and the nature of work they do. This is particularly germane to professional service organizations such as schools, where the Industrial, hierarchical, boss-centered models must give way to more collegial, facilitative structures.

**Enacting Empowerment**

Three questions raised by Quinn & Spreitzer (1997) are pertinent.

1. How do people develop a sense of empowerment?
2. What organizational characteristics facilitate employee empowerment?
3. What can leaders do to facilitate empowerment?

They identify two contrasting perspectives on empowerment, based on different assumptions.
The first perspective sees empowerment as delegation and accountability. It is a top-down, mechanistic view that emphasises control and compliance. The second perspective sees empowerment as a ‘process of risk taking’, and personal growth based on the assumption of mutualism, tolerance and trust. I maintain that regardless of the purpose of empowerment (accountability; professional advancement; workplace democracy, psychic rewards etc) the credibility and reception of empowerment is squarely based on how it is fostered and implemented.

The Quinn & Spreitzer research found four characteristics that are common to most empowered people.

Empowered people have a sense of **self-determination** (this means that they are free to choose how to do their work; they are not micro-managed).

Empowered people have a sense of **meaning** (they feel that their work is important to them; they care about what they are doing).

Empowered people have a sense of **competence** (this means that they are confident about their ability to do their work well; they know they can perform).

Finally, empowered people have a sense of **impact** (this means that people believe they can have influence on their work unit; others listen to their ideas).

With reference to education, Blasé & Blasé’s (1997) research suggests that the discussion on teacher empowerment should focus on leadership strategies of principals and ways in which they impact on teachers sense of empowerment.

Secondly, it is important to ‘capture’ teachers’ own perceptions of the characteristics of empowering school leaders and what being empowered mean to them.

Their study pointed to eight principal strategies and teacher characteristics that influence teachers’ sense of empowerment.

1. **Demonstrating trust in teachers**;
2. **Developing shared governance structures**;
3. **Encouraging/listening to individual input**;
4. **Encouraging individual teacher autonomy**;
5. **Encouraging innovation, creativity, risk-taking**;
6. **Giving rewards**;
7. **Providing support**;
8. **Caring, enthusiasm, optimism, honesty, friendliness**.

Forrester (2000) suggests six channels to ‘High Voltage Empowerment’.

1. **Enlarge power of the empowered**.
2. **Be sure of what you want to do**.
3. Differentiate among employees.
4. Support power sharers.
5. Build fitting systems.
6. Focus on results.

Kouzes & Posner argue, when you strengthen others, your level of influence with them is increased. When you go out of your way on behalf of others, you build up credit with them – credit that may be drawn upon when extraordinary efforts are required. Leaders create a sense of covenant when they help others to grow and develop. When the leader is viewed as helpful, other people will more likely be committed to the leader and the organization’s goals. (Kouzes & Posner. 1987, p.165).

Enabling Workplaces
In summary, empowerment is intimately connected to intentionality, feelings, meaning, mutuality and authentic engagement. Distributive leadership is an intentional platform driving the workplace culture; empowerment creates the necessary potency.

Based on my experience over the years, I am convinced distributive leadership can instil a genuinely empowered learning community where:

   Ongoing learning and improvement permeates every facet of the school culture.
   Teachers value and celebrate interdependence and teamwork.
   Relationships are sustained by mutualization, trust and collegiality.
   Purposeful engagement with all its stakeholders is actively encouraged.

Enabling leaders
   Support institutional growth, renewal and resilience.
   Stimulate commitment to the core business.
   Invest in ongoing professional learning and capacity building.
   Create collaborative decisional structures that synergise efforts and outcomes.
   Model authenticity, compassion, and excellence.
   Encourage and resource innovation and change.

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Useful Bibliography


