

Changing the School Leadership Paradigm

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The response to the turbulence of the 1970s in America was well documented by the staff of the management consulting firm of Rohrer, Hibler & Replogle, Inc. in *The Managerial Challenge: A Psychological Approach to the Changing World of Management*. They argued that: “the overall reason for so much change is that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution. Massive and fundamental changes affect every aspect of organizational life. Interpersonal relations are different. The traditional American work ethic that puts value on work itself is often questioned. The national commitment to free enterprise has been eroded by government itself. What many individuals expect from the work place is dramatically altered from the expectations of a decade ago. Changes such as these, taken together, amount to a groundswell, if not an earthquake, and cause grave concern in the world of management.”

Informed observers in Trinidad and Tobago would readily agree that these comments reflect what has been taking place in our nation over the past three decades. Many principals in our schools, however, may not have recognised that the teachers who are now joining our education sector have also been affected and may be responding to what has been identified in this book as:

- the perceived need to have some say in what personally affects them;
- the militant feeling that the members of the group must hang together to avoid hanging separately;
- the shift in attitude from the sources of authority to the authority of peer groups;
- the demand by all for a quality of life that allows opportunity for leisure and fulfilling employment;
- the perceived need for participative management.

Rapid and widespread changes in societal attitudes have resulted in a great deal of dissatisfaction, conflict, and turbulence among staff in our schools. Teachers repeatedly complain about the authoritarian leadership styles of their principals, while principals lament that teachers have become resentful towards them. Failure of leaders and policy makers in the education sector to quickly address these areas of concern may well result in the collapse of the sector. Already one can identify pockets of resistance and ripples of withdrawn enthusiasm in some schools, often demonstrated by rising anomie, unpunctuality, absenteeism, and declining productivity in schools.

Traditionally we were taught that once leaders made effective use of power and authority all would fall into place and subordinates would comply. However, this is no longer the case. Management experts and leadership gurus now advise that, in order to ensure their effectiveness, principals, vice-principals, and heads of department need to work with and for their team members, empowering and inspiring them to achieve personal and organisational goals.

Teachers and auxiliary personnel in the nation's schools have been found to respond more readily to democratic types of leadership than to authoritarian leadership. The research literature suggests that democratic educational leadership is characterised by principals who, although they generally ask their staff to follow rules and procedures, display some concern for the expectations of their team members and try to promote flexibility, autonomy, and collaborative decision making.

On the other hand, authoritarian leadership, which now plagues many of our schools and which is resented by the new breed of teacher and workers in the education sector, is represented by principals who have a tendency to impose specific directions on staff, without consultation, and who demand that rules and procedures be followed to the letter.

Within recent times, a new concept of leadership, which sees service and humility as important dimensions, has emerged in the literature. This perspective argues that organisations tend to become stronger when leaders make "serving others" their number one priority.

Principals must understand that their leadership style, to a great extent, also helps to determine school climate. Experience has shown that democratic leadership styles tend to generate open school climates, while authoritarian leadership styles help to develop closed school climates.

According to many educational experts, open school climates are characterised by: (a) supportive principal behaviour towards teachers, auxiliary staff, and parents; (b) a tendency on the part of the principal to avoid close and rigid supervision; (c) principal behaviour that facilitates the work of teachers and auxiliary staffs; (d) collegiality among teachers; and (e) a cohesive network of social support among teachers, students, auxiliary staff, and parents.

Closed school climates have been defined by educators as being characterised by: (a) low supportive behaviour from the principal towards teachers, auxiliary staff, students, and parents; (b) a tendency on the part of the principal towards close and rigid supervision; (c) principal behaviour that tends to hinder rather than facilitate the work of teachers and auxiliary staff; (d) a low level of collegiality among teachers; and (e) disengaged behaviour on the part of all personnel, which in turn underscores a lack of cohesion and social support among them and students.

All of this demonstrates the need to appoint principals who engage in democratic and humanistic practices so that they can build open climates. However, while training can provide expertise and skills, the extent to which social graces are acquired is a function of the individual's experiences and exposure to healthy and positive environments and interactions. Clearly, an interview cannot be the sole mechanism for appointing principals. Neither can certification be the sole criterion. There is need to carefully investigate the track record of aspiring principals, vice-principals, and heads of department. In addition, they must exhibit an acceptable psychological profile.

In keeping with the demands of today's society, organizations need leaders who are interested in more than power, status, and financial remuneration. The society needs leaders who are prepared to offer service to all, to develop and sustain open climates, and to engage in democratic leadership practices.

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