

Leading Emotional Systems in Educational Organizations

by Joyce Huth Munro

An excerpt adapted from
“A Systems Approach to Issues in Educational Leadership”
In *Roundtable Viewpoints: Educational Leadership*, McGraw-Hill, 2008
Used by permission of McGraw-Hill.

One of the striking findings of recent research by The Center for Creative Leadership is that building and mending relationships is a highly valued skill for leaders. Historically, this “soft skill” has ranked low in surveys. But our ideas about leadership are changing and relationship building is now the second most needed skill (behind another soft skill: leading employees). The high ranking of relationships indicates that the days of casting a private vision, acting unilaterally, and making decisions in isolation, are on the wane. It also says that treating faculty and staff as problems is no longer valid; rather, employees are a wealth that has been undervalued.

Attention to relationships becomes even more important due to the changing nature of teaching and learning. Today teachers and staff move across functional boundaries to assist individual students or implement new programs or collaborate with community partners. This is quite different from a traditional grade or discipline-based group led by a single person who is responsible for getting the job done. In a networked institution, the assignment is shared, leadership is shared, problems and decisions are shared.

Shared work is a practice that fits well in a “complex, no-one-in-charge, shared-power world” (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, p. 4). This paradigm could lead to the idea that sharing power preempts leadership—a troubling notion—until it is placed in perspective.

All this does not mean that the in-charge leadership image has disappeared or completely lost its usefulness. The connective or quiet leader sometimes has to make a decision and implement it using whatever powers and controls he or she has. Similarly, leaders who are formally in charge know they often must consult and compromise with other powerful people before acting. In a shared-power situation, however, leadership that encourages the participation of others must be emphasized because only it has the power to inspire and mobilize those others. In the effort to tackle public problems, leadership and power must be consciously shared with a view to eventually creating power-sharing institutions within a regime of mutual gain (p. 32).

Work that is shared heightens the importance of relationships in organizations and makes relationship building a central skill for leaders. Interaction skills like consultation, negotiation, compromise, and conflict management are an integral part of daily life for leaders in organizations that operate by sharing power and distributing leadership. Shared work and shared power also mean more investment in team building, group learning, and culture formation.

Leadership of an Emotional Process (from a Systems Point of View)

Shared work has other unforeseen effects that must be dealt with. One of these is the emotional nature of work, an attribute of work that has been ignored. (Keep in mind that emotional is more than feelings—it is the instinctual response of humans to change, tension, and threat). Teamwork in particular is emotion-filled work. Individuals in teams are in vulnerable positions because their knowledge and expertise are on display in front of others. Every aspect of shared work is done publicly and constant interaction is difficult for some individuals. Stress and anxiety are bound to

be present in teams and there are no quick fixes for relationships that are stressful and anxious.

The emotional side of organizational life is a hot topic these days in both popular and academic literature. One practitioner whose work has broken ground on the connections between emotional processes at home and at work is Edwin Friedman. His premise (carried forward by Beal and Treadwell) is that chronic societal anxiety negatively impacts American leadership. The tendency to criticize and regress to the past is so powerful that tinkering with the personnel structure or adopting an innovative development program is not enough.

Administrative, technical, and managerial solutions (such as centralizing, de-centralizing, re-centralizing, deconstructing, downsizing, right-sizing, or otherwise re-engineering) may often alleviate the symptoms of an organization. But they rarely modify the malignant chronic anxiety that could have been part of that institution's "corporate culture" for generations, and that will, if left unmodified, resurface periodically in different shapes and forms. (Beal & Treadwell, 1999, p. 80).

Psychological or sociological theories are not sufficient to support leaders in a "leadership-toxic climate." Climate change begins by recognizing that negative or regressive emotional processes at work are systemic and must be dealt with throughout the school. An intentional approach to relationship-building means an administrator first understands that teaching is emotion-filled and then takes steps to address negative emotions, particularly anxiety.

Poorly defined leaders unwittingly compromise learning and achievement by avoiding the emotional processes within their schools. The best way to modify the culture is by taking "the kind of stands that set limits to the invasiveness of those who lack self-regulation" (Beal & Treadwell, 1999, p.

11). In other words, leaders must be decisive in dealing with negative relationships and processes in an institution.

Educational leaders lead emotional systems, but the paradox is that instead of immediately trying to fix relationships or motivate others, leaders must first shift attention to their own ways of relating and communicating. The chief goal of leaders is to focus on their own integrity and capacity for dealing with the emotional processes of the organization. (Beal & Treadwell, 1999, p. 11). Leaders do this by taking well-defined stands, treating conflict as natural, and determining the limits of consensus for good decision-making.

When leaders temper their responses to conflict and monitor their emotions, they are less likely to become enmeshed in anxious, risk-averse processes in the organization. Having gained some amount of autonomy (self-differentiation), leaders are better able to connect with teacher or staff teams, without reverting to blaming or correcting. In some ways, this leadership approach to relationship systems is the same as a strengths approach. By looking for and supporting strengths, leaders move the organization in a positive direction rather than enabling it to be more reactive or regressive.

Triangles—the Basic Shape of Relationships

Relationship systems can be thought of in ways similar to the natural systems of biology and physics that are typically characterized as open, fluid, interactive and adaptive. Rather than viewing an organization as a collection of individuals acting out static, scripted roles, culture is the medium for interaction and these processes are played out flexibly and fluidly. A focus on relationship processes rather than on the individuals enables leaders to apply emotional systems thinking in the workplace.

Fundamental in emotional systems theory is the notion that people strive for stability in relationships. The simplest relationship is between two people, but a dyad won't remain a stable relationship for very long. When a dyad or two-person relationship becomes conflicted, the natural tendency is to drag someone else (or something else) into the conflict in an attempt to take pressure off and make the relationship more stable. This third element can be a person, an issue, or another relationship. Often, the third person will be the leader.

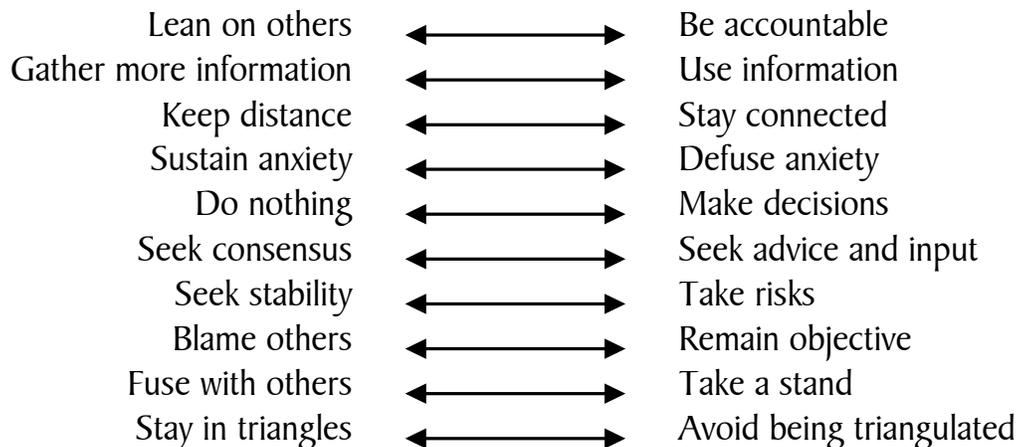
Emotional triangles are natural and they have both positive and negative effects in the workplace. Triangles become dysfunctional when the third person begins to take responsibility for the other two people or attempts to solve their problem. Triangulation is the term Friedman uses when an individual with perceived power is pulled into other people's issues.

By resisting the pull, holding to the vision and making "I" statements, leaders can be more objective in analyzing and understanding emotional triangles. And once leaders have that understanding, they explain what they see happening and enlist the support of everyone to help emotional systems remain functional. Only then can leaders influence the climate and effectiveness of the entire institution. Perhaps the most important contribution of leaders who employ a systems approach to emotional relationships is being catalysts for growth and learning.

Finding the Right Balance for Leading Emotional Systems

*I*n shared work settings, leadership "...increasingly depends upon the power of creative relationships and all that is required in establishing, sustaining, nurturing, and bearing the anxiety involved in working through the medium of creative relationships" (Krantz, 1998, p. 11). If relationship is the medium, then the job of educational leaders in dealing with the big issues schools face is more than being courageous, taking a stand and sticking to

it. It is equally important to stay connected to those who are charged with carrying out the mission. Leading a school during anxious times is a matter of finding the right balance, not finding a quick fix. Friedman portrays balance within an emotional system as a continuum:



Continuum of Leadership Functioning in Emotional Systems. Adapted from Beal & Treadwell, 1999, p. 303.

On the left side of the continuum are behaviors that Friedman calls weak leadership and on the right side are strong leadership behaviors. A leader may be weak in one and strong in another, but through training and practice the pattern of behavior can be strengthened. Note that behaviors on the left side are all about togetherness, while those on the right are about self-identity. The goal is to find the right balance—appropriate for the level of anxiety—that is effective for leading emotional systems.

It is important to emphasize that taking a systems approach is not the same as a systematic search for more data or the right technique. The more leaders try to help people by fixing the situation, the less likely the organization is to grow and improve. If educational leaders these days are to be successful, they must find ways of living within the system while remaining steadfast in defense of the common good for the institution.

The twin problems confronting leadership in our society today, the failure of nerve and the desire for a quick fix, are not the result of

overly strong self but of weak or no self. There certainly is reason to guard against capricious, irrational, autocratic, vainglorious leadership in any form of organized life. But democratic institutions have far more to fear from lack of self in their leaders and the license this gives to factionalism (which is not the same as dissent) than from too much strength in the executive power (Beal & Treadwell, 1999, p. 217).

Ronald Heifetz, a leadership expert at Harvard University, takes a compatible approach to leadership of emotional systems in institutions. He stresses that adaptive leadership for today's schools requires leaders who have courage to "interrogate reality." As Heifetz describes it, the leader's role in an emotional/social system is twofold: to help people face reality and conflict and to mobilize them to make change. In doing so, a leader must be a diagnostician and, when resistance starts, avoid taking things personally:

It's dangerous to challenge people in a way that will require changes in their priorities, their values, their habits. It's dangerous to try to persuade people to take more responsibility than they feel comfortable with. And that's why so many leaders get marginalized, diverted, attacked, seduced. You want to be able to stir the pot without letting it boil over. You want to regulate disequilibrium, to keep people in a productive discomfort zone.

Leading today is not just about making adequate yearly progress or achieving standards or meeting goals, it is also about bringing value and change to an institution. Taking courageous stands, diagnosing problems, making decisions, building relationships—these are the main functions of educational leaders for our day and time. With so much at stake for educational organizations in the age of the quick fix, leaders must first adopt a calm, non-anxious sense of self that is capable of guiding emotional systems for the long haul.

References

Edward W. Beal & Margaret M. Treadwell, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. Edwin Friedman Estate/Trust, 1999.

Barbara C. Crosby & John M. Bryson, *Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World*. Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Yiannis Gabriel, "The Hubris of Management." *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 1998.

Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Harvard University Press, 1994.

Kristina Jaskyte, "Transformational Leadership, Organizational Culture, and Innovativeness in Nonprofit Organizations." *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, Winter 2004.

James Krantz, "Anxiety & the New Order." *Leadership in the 21st Century*, International Universities, 1998.

Andre Martin, *The Changing Nature of Leadership*. The Center for Creative Leadership, 2005.

Keith Morrison, *School Leadership and Complexity Theory*. Routledge Falmer, 2002.

Warren Smith, "Chaos Theory and Postmodern Organization." *International Journal of Organizational Theory and Behavior*, 2001.

Daniel J. Syantek & Richard P. DeShon, "Organizational Attractors: A Chaos Theory Explanation of Why Cultural Change Efforts Often Fail." *Public Administration Quarterly*, 1993.

William C. Taylor, "The Leader of the Future: Harvard's Ronald Heifetz Offers a Short Course on the Future of Leadership," *Fast Company*, May 1999.
www.fastcompany.com/online/25/heifetz.html

Stephen J. Zaccaro & Richard J Klimoski, *The Nature of Organizational Leadership: Understanding the Performance Imperatives Confronting Today's Leaders*. Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Web Resources on the Systems Approach:

AASA Center for System Leadership www.aasa.org/AASACenter

Center for Creative Leadership www.ccl.org

Center for Leadership Studies www.situational.com

MIT Systems Dynamics in Education <http://sysdyn.clexchange.org>

Pegasus Communications www.pegasuscom.com

The Sustainability Institute www.sustainabilityinstitute.org

Author

Joyce Huth Munro is Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia. Contact her at munrojh@chc.edu or 215-248-7120

Roundtable Viewpoints: Educational Leadership is available from McGraw-Hill at www.mhhe.com

From ROUNDTABLE VIEWPOINTS: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, 1/e by Joyce Huth Munro. Copyright © 2008 by The McGraw-Hill Companies. Reproduced by permission of McGraw-Hill Contemporary Learning Series.