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But He Did Everything Right: The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in School Leadership

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Introduction

"He got what he deserved." Elizabeth was expressing her reaction to the results of an end-of-term evaluation of the principal of The Middle School which led to him eventually leaving the school. Her feelings were shared by many other teachers at the school. Why was it that so many teachers felt so negatively about this principal?

Research on what constitutes an effective principal has a long history. It has been largely done in the positivist tradition and examined administration as a science where success is based on rules and procedures (Foster, 1991). This article takes a constructivist look at one principal as he tried to make a difference. The purpose of taking this approach was to attempt to reflect the polyphonic voices of the teachers and the principal as they negotiated a difficult year.

There exists no general agreement as to what the term leadership means, how leadership is best demonstrated, how one is best prepared to become a leader, or what special competencies are demanded of those who would be leaders in educational institutions (Knezevich, 1984; Chermers, 1993). "Once again ... the problem is lack of consensus within the profession regarding which behaviors lend themselves to effective leadership and under what circumstances" (Davis, 1998). Early studies on leadership in schools tended to center on traits: physical, intellectual, and personal (Yukl, 1989). The question was, "Is there some combination of innate traits that will help a person become a successful leader?"

Ubben and Hughes (1987) drew four consistent threads out of early studies of successful principals. The first of these, *strong leadership*, included the principal's interpersonal skills and personality. The second thread is *human behaviors*. These "emphasize human relations skills.... These skills become major contributors to the climate of the school" (Ubben & Hughes, 1987, p. 23). Interpersonal skills are one of the keys to success for administrators (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1986). A third thread is *organizational climate*. Organizational climate is made up of the feelings that teachers and administrators have toward each other

(Ubben & Hughes, 1987). Lastly, a *positive relationship* is considered very important. For teachers to feel positive about their status within an organization, there should be communicative openness, a sense of acknowledged professional competence, a sense of collegiality, a knowledge that the administration feels that the teacher has worth, a concern for growth, professional freedom and a supportive atmosphere (Blumberg, 1974; Campbell, 2000; Gullatt & Lofton, 1996).

A leader must also consider his status within a school. One problem can be cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This is the difference between the perception of what others think about you and what others actually think. "Establishing relationships with subordinates is a critical factor in their work as leaders. People react to what they think they see in others" (Razik & Swanson, 1995, p. 48). For example, if you think that you are a kindly jokester, but you get feedback that others think that you are unfeeling, there is cognitive dissonance.

When there is cognitive dissonance, there must be some kind of resolution for a person to remain mentally healthy (Hyman, 1975). Hyman (1975) suggests three alternative ways to relieve this dissonance. First, is to simply dismiss the other person's feedback as being untrue. Second, you can change the perception that we have of ourselves to match the evidence. Lastly, you can use the evidence to act as a motivator to help you become the person that you thought you were in the beginning.

How a leader functions in an organization is very important, but sometimes perceptions do not match function. Hall (1990) suggests that even if a leader has the "right" traits, the situation will determine how the traits will be perceived and used. A good leader is affected by the personalities in a school. The principal's personality, and those of his subordinates, makes a difference when it comes to getting things done. Perceptions are also important. Whether a leader accommodates his style to match the situation or tries to change the situation to meet his style, perceptions matter.

The Place

The Middle School really doesn't show its seventy plus years of service. A fire several years ago erased most of the age marks and the post-fire make over helps this old school appear years younger. Some of the old shows through, however, if you know where to look. For instance, this school sports a full sized football stadium (complete with lights for night games), a practice field, concrete tennis courts, and a campus size that would be the envy of most high schools. This is because it used to be a high school, and the only high school in this south-central Texas town. It has also been an elementary school and college in its long career.

The buildings are of a uniform beige brick and are a fitting backdrop for the large oak trees and green areas that surround the school. Much of the original architecture is preserved in the post-fire buildings and, coupled with the other sections that were built during various architectural eras, serve to give the exterior a comfortable feel.

Inside the buildings, however, is another story. As comfortable, and loose in the sleeves as the outside seems, that is how institutional the inside is. Long, straight halls, sharp corners, and neutral colors are the order of the day. All that breaks up the clinical appearance are some signs with slogans that hang everywhere. One proclaims, "Ganas!" Another extols the virtues of individual hard work bringing individual rewards. These were put up by the new principal and seem to be very popular with not only the students, but the teachers as well.

The People

The student population runs between 1150 and 1200 most of the time. Of these, most are Hispanic. The second largest ethnic group is Anglo. African Americans make up only a small percentage of the student population. A few Asian students sprinkle the hallways. This is the largest of the three middle schools in town.

The teacher population is quite different from the student population. There are significant numbers of Hispanic and African American teachers, but the vast majority are Anglo. The gender majority among all of the ethnic groups is female. In experience, the teaching faculty ranges from 25 years of service to first year teachers. At least 16 of the 72 teachers on the staff have taught at The Middle School for 20 years or more. Teachers who stay longer than ten years tend to finish their careers there. Teachers of "core" subjects are placed into grade level teams. Each team has approximately 120 students. These teams are responsible not only for the core curriculum but also for most of the discipline management for their students.

Administration is also another matter. The principal is Anglo, but the two assistant principals are one each Hispanic and Black. Whether by design or providence, this mix is seen as a good thing by everyone.

Methodology

Study Design

As a teacher in The Middle School, I acted as a participant-observer during the course of the study. Interviews were conducted (usually in the participant's room or office). The interviews were 30 to 45 minutes during the first round of interviewing. Interviews continued until redundancy of information resulted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 133).

Before sampling began, the focus of the study had to be revisited to look at selected participants and to determine sampling strategies. It was decided to use purposeful random sampling (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling is the same thing that Goetz and LeCompte (1984) call criterion-based sampling. One purposefully establishes criteria for the inclusion of units of study and then locates units that match the criteria.

Patton (1990) offers the inclusion of random sampling because, "For many audiences, random sampling, even of small groups, will substantially increase the credibility of the results" (p. 179). Purposeful random sampling was used as the initial sampling technique to identify emergent themes that would guide the rest of the study. To set criteria for inclusion of teachers in the initial samples, the teacher population was disaggregate as to male/female, years of experience, grade level, and content/elective balance. This led to a total of eight teachers for the first round including two from each grade level and two elective teachers.

Additional criteria, based on the teacher population of the school were then defined. They called for 44% of the teachers interviewed to have one to ten years of experience and 56% to have ten plus years of experience. Also, the male/female mix was to be approximately 70% female and 30% male. The teachers were then randomly selected at each grade level from within this narrowed pool (i.e. 30%, male, sixth grade, 10 years plus experience).

Analysis of Data

The initial interviews were transcribed and evaluated looking for themes embedded within the information (Denzin, 1978). Through multiple readings of the data, themes emerged. Further evaluation took place by unitizing the data

Interviews were divided into units of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These units were then placed in a database. There were three columns labeled: participant, unit of information (quote), and theme. Into the theme column was placed every category that the researcher could think of into which that unit of information might later fit. This was done for each unit of information in each of the transcribed interviews. This database, using the "match" function was examined to find any theme that seemed to be super ordinate or omnipresent.

Once themes were identified, a new round of interviews began focusing on the verification or negation of the identified themes. Previous participants were questioned, and new participants sought, to shed light on the information. Interviews were continued until redundancy occurred.

By obtaining information from multiple sources, contextual validity was maximized. This, coupled with prolonged engagement and persistent observation, built credibility for the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A member check for reliability was done upon the completion of the first draft of the study results. This was taken to participants for reading and comment. Three groups read it and made group comments that this was what seemed to have happened during the year of the study.

The Principal

Dr. Knue (pseudonym for the principal) was a thirty something man who was working on his doctoral dissertation in administration when he arrived at The Middle School. He arrived with gusto. He was loud, large and remarkably funny, or thought himself to be. He was also smart, informed, and prepared to take the heat necessary to maneuver the school out of the doldrums where it had lain becalmed for some years.

There weren't many changes the first year that Dr. Knue was principal, but there was talk of great things to come his second year, the year of this study. One of the changes that did occur the first year, however, was that we had faculty meetings every Monday afternoon. He also formed committees to study possible innovation and gave the site based decision-making team more responsibility.

As the second year began, Dr. Knue thought that everything was fine.

I spent a couple of periods this week talking to 'Big Boy' about the study. He seems to think that no one is having any trouble adjusting to any of the changes since no one has come to him with problems. Perhaps! (Researcher's Journal Entry)

Everything, however, was not going as smoothly as he hoped. According to interviews, teachers had very mixed opinions about this principal's role in the changes at the school. The following two reflect the negative and positive experiences of teachers with regard to Dr. Knue.

Dr. Knue was not as evident in the halls the year of the study as he had been the year before. During his first year at The Middle School, he had been in the halls between every class as well as making his presence known during all three lunch periods. Now, it was said that he had deferred many of his responsibilities. "Everything seems to be dumped on the vice-principals." (Ellen, Interview)

This feeling was wide spread. He was seen by some as a slacker when it came to his duties around the school. Teachers were heard so say that,

"Dr. Knue needs to help out." (Nan, Interview)

"I don't see the principal holding his load." (Alice, Interview)

The principal's lack of involvement in the daily running of the school was cause for alarm.

"Someone has to take up the slack. This has made a lot of resentment around here. We are going to lose one of them [assistant principals] next year." (Alice, Interview)

The perceived abdication of his responsibilities in the area of discipline and of his leadership role was an ongoing concern. During his first year, Dr. Knue often dropped into classrooms unannounced and visited with the teacher and the kids.

"When Dr. Knue came, he was much more visible. He told you what he wanted." (James, Interview)

The second year, this pretty much stopped.

"Not having the principal around as much is a change. You don't know where you stand." (Gretchen, Interview)

Organizational skills were another leadership area that was questioned. Dr. Knue was perceived as being highly disorganized and his disorganization infected the school.

"There is no chain of command. Who do I go to? Where do I get this?" (Ellen, Interview)

"This year has turned to chaos. I hate it. It makes me uncomfortable." (Fay, Interview)

The decision to limit faculty meetings was another example of poor leadership in the area of organizational management. Teachers who may have resented the every-Monday meetings Dr. Knue's first year, voiced concern about these same meetings being eliminated.

"Faculty meetings are sometimes yes, and sometimes no." (Focus Group Two)

"We have fewer faculty meetings this year.... Poor communication.... How about minutes of faculty meetings?" (Bill, Interview)

Interestingly, faculty meeting had been curtailed by the principal in what he thought was a response to the faculty.

Researcher: Some folks have noticed that we haven't had the weekly faculty meetings that we had last year.

Principal: A lot of teachers complained last year that there were too many faculty meetings. I've decided to cut them back to a minimum this year. We have so much on our plates in the way of new programs that I feel that teachers need the time. (Dr. Knue, Interview)

Another negative expressed by the teachers was in the area of personal relationships. "I feel like I want to run and hide from the administration" (Fay, Interview), said one teacher. There were a number of reasons given for voicing these kinds of feelings. One reason was that teachers felt that they had suffered personal affronts at the principal's hands. For example, one young, first year teacher cried after an evaluation conference with Dr. Knue. She felt that he had been too abrasive in his critique of her teaching.

When the eighth grade began academic teaming at the first of the year, there were many questions. One teacher went to Dr. Knue and asked for help for her team. They were all inexperienced with the concept, and felt like they didn't know what to do. "The big man said you were here and should have known [about teaming]" (Fay, Interview).

Another teacher said, "I was condescended and talked down to [by the principal]. There is a dictatorship, not site based management. Now, we're at Dr. Knue's mercy" (Grethen, Interview).

The above stories, and others like them, circulated all year. When a focus group was asked at the end of the year what the most significant change was for the entire year, the consensus response was, "Attitudes toward administration! He [the principal] seems to think, 'I'm here now! Love me or leave me!'" (Focus Group Two).

Dr. Knue also had his share of support from the teachers at The Middle School. Support came in the areas of leadership, professionalism, and programs.

"For change to take place, we need leadership from the top. Mr. Knue has helped with both discipline and flexibility" (Bill, Interview). A second teacher confirms this feeling. "Now you can do whatever you want, as long as you will work toward it" (Rob, Interview).

Dr. Knue was a big change from Mr. Ould, the previous principal, as far as treating the teachers in a professional manner. Staff development was important to Dr. Knue. "With Dr. Knue, there is more opportunity to train" (Fay, Interview).

Money was a mystery at The Middle School in the years before Dr. Knue came. The staff never knew about where money came from, how much there was, nor how it was spent. "[Dr. Knue] tells us our budget. We can spend it on supplies" (Nan, Interview).

During the fall of the year following the initial study, focus groups were formed to conduct a member check on the study. One of these concerned the memories of teachers' relationships with the principal during the year of the study. The following are comments reached through consensus.

He opened up money and supplies. We were asked what we needed and he checked back. He allowed us to have a say in everything, for example SBDM [Site Based

Decision Making], schedules, the whole thing. We were treated like professionals. Have to give that to Mr. Knue. He let us know what we could do, gave us money to do it ourselves, and came back see if we were successful. He did treat us like professionals in 'that' way (Member Check for Reliability).

Through the enunciation of the word 'that' in their statement, the group wanted in known that there were other ways that they were not treated like professionals. Though these were not enumerated in their group statement, individuals in the group had mentioned, in individual interviews, such things as personal affronts and lack of support with behavior issues.

The language used by teachers in the previous descriptions reflect interesting mindsets. Following are two lists containing words or phrases used by participants to describe the principal.

Positive	Negative
"... leadership ..."	"... abdication ..."
"... flexibility ..."	"... dumped on ..."
"... agenda ..."	"... don't see ... holding his own."
"... tells us ..."	"... needs to help out."
"... Opened up ..."	"... resentment ..."
"... checked back..."	"... backed off ..."
"... treated like professionals ..."	"... chaos ..."

The two lists seem to reflect two different mindsets. Terms like *dumped on* and *resentment* used in the negative list seem to be of a personal nature, while *flexibility*, *agenda*, and *checked back* are more professional. Those who had favorable responses to the principal during his second year appeared to judge him on a professional level. Those who had negative responses judged him on a more personal level.

This manifestation of teacher feelings toward the principal was reflected in the teacher's reactions to an evaluation sent out by the local branch of the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) at the end of the year. The evaluation asked questions concerning the principal's professionalism and leadership as well as his interpersonal skills. The results were very negative. They reflected that the faculty felt that not only were the principal's personal skills lacking, but that his professional leadership was also suspect. Seventy percent of the faculty returned the surveys. A passing score overall was 3.0 out of a possible 4.0. Dr. Knue's overall score was 2.95. In the area of Interpersonal Skills, his score was 2.45.

The results of this survey were surprising to some teachers. A conversation between two teachers in the hall shed some light on how these results may have come about. Two teachers of long service at The Middle School were talking.

Nora approached Elizabeth and asked her,

"Did you hear the results about Dr. Knue's AFT survey? He really got taken to the cleaners."

"He got what he deserved!", said Elizabeth.

"Did you fill out one of the survey sheets?"

"Yes, I sure did."

"Well, I know that you don't like him very much, but most of the questions were about his professional abilities. Don't you think that he really does know what he is doing as far as that goes?"

"When people are angry at someone, they don't separate the two out. They just react. He has treated some nice people very rudely. He even made Miss Royal cry."

"That [giving negative answers based on personal feelings] doesn't seem very fair, or even honest."

Elizabeth turned to go, then turned back and repeated,

"He got what he deserved." (Researcher's Journal Entry)

Post Study Reflections

Through the use of post-study member check, it was found that there was consensus on the impact of Dr. Knue on the campus, but there was one person who approached me apart from the other members of one focus group and asked if she could write an addendum to their group response. These are her written comments

I was concerned about the cloud of negativity hanging over everything Dr. Knue did. The whiners and complainers seem to want to blame all problems on him. You broke a nail, your wife is mad at you—find a way to tie it to him. This is easy to do for two reasons—one, he is not here to defend himself—two, even if he was he might not because he felt that as principal he was ultimately responsible for it all. The interesting thing about these W & C is that they are complaining now about his successor. The very reasons they gave for wanting this new principal are now causes for complaints. Some people like a nice, safe rut, even if the rut is leading nowhere. Expecting them to act like responsible professionals (except where salary is concerned) is threatening to some. Dr. Knue expected you to be professional and responsible. He was not interested in being your nanny or your big brother. He was interested in what you were doing professionally and was willing to help. He had vision. He also planted a lot of seeds that are now sprouting. His successor had an easier time making certain changes (for example, moving everyone around so they would be w/their cluster). Part is due to the fact that Dr. Knue had mentioned these changes. Unconsciously these seeds grew and sprouted. (Member Check Participant, Nora)

Nora was adamant about adding this to the end of this section. Her intent, she said, was not to soften the reality of the experience that the teachers had during the year of the study, but rather to add the balance of calm retrospection

Summary

The experiences of the teachers of The Middle School were, I think, significant. One area of interest revolves around the notion of cognitive dissonance (Hyman, 1975). The principal,

Dr. Knue, seemed to feel that everything was going along all right and that the teachers on the staff were adjusting to him and the changes just fine. "He seems to think that no one is having any trouble adjusting to any of the changes since no one has come to him with problems" (Researcher's Journal Entry). This comment seems to be at odds with this teacher's statement, "This year has turned to chaos. I hate it. It makes me uncomfortable" (Fay, Interview).

A second area where the dissonance was apparent was faculty meetings. "Faculty meetings are sometimes yes, and sometimes no" (Focus Group Two). "We have fewer faculty meetings this year.... Poor communication.... How about minutes of faculty meetings?" (Bill, Interview)

As was mentioned earlier, Dr. Knue thought that he had limited faculty meetings because the faculty wanted them limited.

A lot of teachers complained last year that there were too many faculty meetings. I've decided to cut them back to a minimum this year. We have so much on our plates in the way of new programs that I feel that teachers need the time. (Dr. Knue, Interview)

Dr. Knue, reacting to what he thought he heard from the faculty, ended the weekly faculty meetings. Rather than appreciating the time, the teachers resented the lack of communication. Though several teachers mentioned this dissatisfaction to Dr. Knue, he appears to have taken the first of Hyman's (1975) three alternatives to relieving cognitive dissonance. He dismissed the feedback that he got on teacher dissatisfaction and continued to believe that all was well.

Another area of interest that deals with the principal were the different perspectives that teachers had toward him. When describing him, teachers either were very personal or very professional. Those who talked personally about Dr. Knue tended to feel negatively toward him. Those who used professional language tended to feel positive.

These conflicting opinions about Dr. Knue were most apparent at the end of the school year studied when teachers filled out the AFT evaluation of the principal. The conversation between Elizabeth and Nora during May of the study year highlights the problem.

When Nora tried to get Elizabeth to acknowledge that even though she (Elizabeth) didn't like the principal personally, he was still a bright man and good administrator, Elizabeth simply said, "He got what he deserved!" None of the innovations, the inclusion of teachers in the decision making process and budgetary process, nor the extra staff development that Dr. Knue brought to The Middle School made any difference. In the end it was his personality that was his downfall with many teachers.

Where To Now?

The experiences of teachers with regard to the principal beg further investigation. Dr. Knue did all of the things that Combs (1988) suggests when dealing with the possibility of resistance to change. The teachers had a hand in the plan.

He opened up money and supplies. We were asked what we needed and he checked back. He allowed us to have a say in everything, for example SBDM [Site Based

Decision Making], schedules, the whole thing. We were treated like professionals. Have to give that to Mr. Knue, he let us know what we could do, gave us money to do it ourselves, and came back see if we were successful. He did treat us like professionals in 'that' way. (Member Check for Reliability)

That last phrase, *in 'that' way*, holds the key too much of what needs to be studied further about the principal. People who had problems with the principal had problems at the personal level. Research on school leadership, such as that of Combs (1988), seems to suggest that if a principal follows certain rules and procedures, he will be a successful administrator. The experiences of the teachers at The Middle School suggest something different. Just how important is the leader's personality to his success as a leader? Is personality something that can be taught or learned?

By personality I don't mean personal traits. There is much research in that area (Ubben & Hughes, 1987; Yukl, 1984). A better word might be likability. If teachers don't like a principal, is that principal doomed as a change agent?

Another area of interest, cognitive dissonance, may also be tied to personality. Was there something in Dr. Knue's personality that would not allow him to hear the dissonance and react to it before it was too late? Can someone develop a dissonance ear over time? As we are developing kid watchers in preservice education programs, can administrative programs develop teacher watchers? Dr. Knue didn't successfully watch the teachers at his school.

Though Dr. Knue displayed knowledge of the traits described in leadership research, and put this knowledge to work, he still failed on many levels as a leader. The majority of the faculty felt that, even though they were being treated in a more professional manner, their perception of Dr. Knue as an abrasive person was the deciding factor in the way they saw him as a leader.

It may well be that leading by the book, so to speak, has less impact on successful leadership than has been previously thought. Situations in schools, with the push and pull of personalities, egos, perceptions, and misconceptions may be so complex that they will not succumb to any one set teachable skills. Leaders (principals) have to be alert to, and take action on, the dissonance between what they think is happening and what is really happening. Dr. Knue ignored this and relied on what he knew about leadership theory. This, ultimately, led to his downfall.

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