LEADERSHIP FOR DYNAMIC LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Three recent research projects conducted by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia have found that leadership for effective partnerships around learning is a shared process where many people play a part. The most valuable outcome from partnerships where leadership is shared is the increased individual and community capacities to influence their own futures: better community response to change that leads to enhanced social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses some of the findings from three recent research projects conducted by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia. Common characteristics of the leadership process in effective partnerships emerged from investigations of collaborations associated with schools, vocational education and training, and other learning activities in regional Australia. The partnerships found in the studies were the foundation of dynamic learning communities, able to exert some control over their futures.

This paper will first review theories about leadership for learning and leadership in communities. A discussion of findings from the three research projects will follow. The conclusion highlights effective leadership as a shared process where many people play a part. Formal, designated leaders are key players, but others, people we have termed ‘boundary crossers’ (Peirce & Johnson, 1997) who speak the language of educational institutions and the community, are also important.

VIEWS OF LEADERSHIP

There are three main theoretical views of leadership according to Barker (1997). Traditional leadership literature regards leadership as an ability, or a set of traits or behaviours that can be taught. Barker argues that this view confuses leadership with management, which does require particular behaviours. Leadership is about change, whereas management is about creating stability.

Established forms of leadership in the literature are all based on an underlying concept of leadership centred on a person, who is referred to as the ‘leader’ (Falk & Mulford, 2001). This underlying but pervasive idea frames our own quite stereotypical views of leadership in a leader-follower sense, where the leader is often a high profile figure. In our society, this concept is not universally applicable, in the sense that these more traditional ‘leaders’ were, and often still are, dominated by gender and class characteristics. Leaders are often associated with older, white, middle-class males. To account for factors such as the increasing need to work across sectors and to involve
more stakeholders in rapid responses to change, a shift is required. The shift is more on emphasising a notion of leadership as more egalitarian, and dependent on the purpose and context in which leadership is required.

Barker’s second theoretical view is leadership as a *relationship* that emphasises interactions between people. According to this view, espoused by Rost (1991, 1993), leaders and collaborators work together to affect change. Both leaders and collaborators bring resources to the relationship that are used to accomplish change. Leaders are distinguished from collaborators by their possession of power resources which they use to exercise greater influence.

The third view is that leadership is a dynamic and collaborative *process* in which leadership roles are not defined (Barker, 1997). Here, leadership is a group rather than individual process dominated by a designated ‘leader’. Through the leadership process, which involves influencing, compromising, and sacrificing, a new shared vision for the future is gradually developed to reflect the collective needs of the group. Leadership is therefore created as individuals and groups interact and collaborate. The concept of leadership as a process represents a more recent leadership paradigm which challenges thinking about traditional leadership practices and training.

**Community leadership**

Research indicates that rural communities in which change has been effectively implemented display a number of similarities in terms of their participatory approach to decision making, cooperative community spirit, and deliberate transition of power to youth. These communities make and implement their own decisions whilst at the same time recognising the importance of external resources (Cavaye, 2000). Chrislip & Larson (1994), from their studies of a number of cases of community collaboration in North America, identified a number of key elements of successful collaborations, including broad-based community involvement, strong stakeholder groups, credibility and openness of the leadership process, and the need to overcome mistrust (and hence, build trust) between the stakeholders. As well as fostering widespread community participation, there is a need to form institutional partnerships between groups such as Chambers of Commerce, business and industry, schools, and government entities. In those communities where sustainable change has been effected, Australian research highlighted how the leadership process facilitated the articulation of a common purpose or community vision, initiated commitment to the vision, and encouraged community participation in enacting the vision (Sorensen & Epps, 1996).

National, regional and community development are increasingly seen as dependent on the capacity of nations, regions, and communities to learn so as to adapt and manage change to their collective advantage. Recent reports from the OECD entitled *The well-being of nations: The role of human and social capital* (OECD, 2001a), and *Cities and regions in the new learning economy* (OECD, 2001b) highlight the crucial role of learning in social and economic wellbeing:

“There is widespread agreement that the production and distribution of knowledge are increasingly significant processes in the determination of economic development and competitiveness. …. The development of the
learning economy involves a complexity of social and economic processes” (OECD, 2001b, p. 7).

Lane & Dorfman (1997) argued that effective community development is a collaborative process which contributes to the development and use of social capital. Social capital can be defined as the norms and networks or relationships that allow individuals to work together to produce mutually beneficial outcomes (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Lane and Dorfman identified five dimensions of an effective community development process: collaborative and integrated involvement and participation; peer-based relationships among diverse stakeholders which are facilitated by a collaborative leader; multiple partners and multiple partnership levels; the community as the change agent; and goals that are both process oriented (building social capital) and task oriented (using social capital to achieve goals). They conceived of the community development process as consisting of a number of sequential steps or stages. By conceiving of leadership as a collective process through which a shared vision is developed and enacted, the similarities between Barker’s (1997) third view of leadership (as a process) and the community development process can be analysed.

Leadership for learning

The OECD (2001b) notes that the social instructional structures and relations present in localities are key determinants of the capacity of localities to respond to the pressures of the new competitive environment. Local leadership, especially leadership for learning, is thus a key determinant of future wellbeing.

Research on schools, TAFE institutes, and universities in regional communities shows that educational institutions can play a role that extends beyond the provision of education and training for young people and other students in the community (Allison & Keane, 1999; Falk, 2000). Educational institutions act as a focus for community activity, provide expertise, and are a component of a community’s capacity or ability to choose to pursue a course of action (Falk, 2000).

Research into effective educational leadership supports the need to foster collective leadership processes in order to bring about and support sustainable change within educational settings. For example, Sergiovanni (1994) argued that sustainable school improvement efforts revolve around the concept of the school as a community rather than an organization, and noted that an outcome of community building in schools is the strengthening of other community institutions such as the family and the neighbourhood (community). In support of this view, Lambert (1998) argued that educational leadership is a reciprocal learning process amongst people who share goals and visions. Inherent in this process is active participation by teachers and parents, which is likely to come about through the redistribution of power and authority within the school, and the development of a culture in which everyone has the right and potential to be a leader. The notion of reciprocal leadership is also supported in the community development literature (see, for example, Langone & Rohs, 1995).

The view of leadership as a collective, reciprocal process builds on Burns’ (1978) ‘transforming leadership’, which he described as “the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals.
independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers” (p. 425). Central to this definition is that those involved in the process must either have mutual or similar goals, in other words, commitment to change. Burns’ (1978) transforming leadership bears similarities with Chrislip & Larson’s (1994) collaborative model of community leadership, in that both focus on meeting the needs of all, and involve stakeholders working together as peers.

More recent educational leadership research (see, for example, Leithwood, 1994; and Silins & Mulford, in press) indicates that Burns’ (1978) concept of commitment is central to what is now generally referred to as ‘transformational leadership’. This research argues that a transformational model of leadership facilitates effective school reform. Transformational leadership practices of school Principals and other formal school leaders include the development of a widely shared school vision, developing a collaborative culture which supports the school’s vision, fostering the commitment and capacity of staff, distributing responsibility for leadership, and supporting collaboration with appropriate resourcing including time and funding (Leithwood, 1994). Of particular relevance is the recent work of Silins & Mulford (in press), which established a positive relationship between transformational leadership practices within schools and the extent of distributive leadership.

ABOUT THE THREE PROJECTS

This paper analyses themes from three research projects, all of which employed qualitative research methodologies based on ethnographic principles (Tedlock, 2000). The report More than an education: leadership for rural school–community partnerships (Kilpatrick et al., forthcoming), funded by the Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation, employed a case study design to investigate the ways in which five very different rural schools contribute to their communities, beyond the education of young people. The role of VET in regional Australia (CRLRA, 2000, 2001), funded by the Australian National Training Authority, involved over 400 semi-structured interviews with learners, training providers, and community representatives in over 40 communities in ten regions, in order to understand how vocational education and training (VET) contributes to regional communities. Leadership in vocational education and training: leadership by design, not by default (Falk & Smith, forthcoming), funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, collected data from twelve VET providers in all states to investigate the relationship between effective VET leadership and the context of that leadership. Readers interested in details of the methodologies are referred to the project reports.

THE LEADERSHIP PROCESS

The findings from the projects indicated that in order to analyse the influence of leadership on learning and communities, the unit of analysis should be the leadership process, rather than the traits, attributes or styles of those individuals designated as ‘leaders’. In all three projects there were many players who were active in ‘leading’ any single intervention or project. The actions of these players at different stages in the life of the interventions or projects indicated strongly that traditional analysis of the performance of individual leaders misses key aspects of the leadership of interventions or projects. Only by analysing the leadership process are interactions between ‘leaders’ and the various contexts that arise as the process progresses, captured. Analysing
leadership in this way is in keeping with the direction of recent educational and community development leadership research which raises concerns about the limitations of much traditional leadership theory because of its focus on ‘the leader’ (see, for example, Silins & Mulford, in press; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Chrislip & Larson, 1994).

**Proactive, shared, and visionary leadership**

Analysis of over 50 partnerships and collaborations around learning for *The role of VET* project showed that successful community partnerships and collaborations tend to be related to certain characteristics of the players in the leadership process. Characteristics associated with success include a clear and collective vision, particularly one that is collaborative and goal oriented, and being proactive in seeking opportunities to achieve the vision. For example, the committee of a successful community training provider and job network organization in one small town was described as “always looking out for opportunity and anything that is going to make a difference”.

Also found in this project was that people in leadership roles need a positive outlook, a people orientation, and should have the ability to inspire enthusiasm and nurture leadership in others. A process that widens the ‘base’ of leaders and develops their identities and self-perceptions as ‘leaders’ leads directly to an improved community capacity to control its own future. In an example from *The role of VET* project, a community development officer from a remote mining town described how volunteers working in community services were deliberately involved in a national conference. She went on to note that those people now had skills and identities (they “saw themselves” in the new role) that they could use to organize other activities. This is an example of what Falk & Mulford (2001) call ‘enabling leadership’, which is the process of enabling stakeholders in the leadership process to acquire the skills and identify resources needed to take on leadership roles.

The structure, procedures, and culture of the group and people working in a leadership role were mentioned frequently as contributing to successful outcomes of partnerships and collaborations in *The role of VET* project. This highlights the importance of having resources and human and social infrastructure, including leadership, to ensure that collaborative and cooperative arrangements function effectively.

A key finding from the *Leadership by design, not by default* project is that leadership is about an intervention (which may, for example, take the form of a project) rather than being solely the province of a single leader or a leader’s characteristics. No single leadership style is adequate to meet the requirements of the whole range of engagements implicated in a leadership intervention. There is scope for a number of individuals with a range of leadership styles indicating that an effective leadership process is about shared leadership.

**Who are the players in the leadership process?**

The findings from the *Leadership for rural school–community partnerships* project show a process for school–community linkages (termed interventions in the *Leadership by design, not by default* project) where leadership roles are distributed among people inside and outside the schools, and among formal school and community leaders and others.
The leadership process was facilitated by certain individuals within each community, most notably school Principals and those people termed boundary crossers, who provide a bridge between school and community. Principals legitimise potential school–community partnerships, and play an important role in ensuring there are ongoing opportunities for interaction for all community members, as well as facilitating the development of structures and processes that foster group visioning. Their transformational leadership practices empower others as effective players in the leadership process. These activities are complemented by boundary crossers, who legitimise potential school–community partnerships within the wider community, and whose communication and interpersonal skills strengthen the relationship between the school and community. In one community, the chair of the school council who worked for the state library was a boundary crosser. This person identified an opportunity to have a community online access centre in the school and did considerable work preparing the (successful) community submission. In another community, a business person was employed by the school as coordinator for its VET-in-schools program, a role usually filled by a teacher. This boundary crosser spoke the languages of business and school and was able to involve the business community as an equal partner with the school in the VET-in-schools program.

Evidence from each of the five *Leadership for rural school–community partnerships* project study sites indicates that effective leadership for implementing school–community partnerships goes further than involving or consulting with all stakeholders during the decision-making process. Rather, effective leadership for school–community partnerships is a collective process during which school and community go about developing and realizing shared visions.

A chronological look at the leadership process

Two of the projects, *Leadership by design, not by default,* and *Leadership for rural school–community partnerships,* took particular interventions or linkages in which educational institutions were involved, and analysed the chronological leadership process. From these projects it was clear that the leadership process in implementing partnerships begins with a *trigger* stage, which relates to the identification of a problem or opportunity for change that impacts on, or is likely to impact on, both educational institution and community. This is followed by *initiation,* in which informal processes come into play in order to mobilise resources to address the problem or opportunity. Next comes *development,* which relates to the implementation of formal processes to tackle the problem or develop the opportunity. At this stage more players become committed to the intervention or linkage. The fourth and fifth stages cover *maintenance* and *sustainability* of the linkage. During these stages effective management of the linkage is facilitated by processes and resources that have been put in place, and the partners review and renew their vision and goals and scan for opportunities and new problems in relation to the linkage. As the leadership process is cyclical, the fifth stage feeds back to either the trigger (for a new linkage) or initiation (for changes to the existing linkage) stages.

Communities and schools which share the belief that education is the responsibility of the whole community, and work together, drawing on skills and knowledge of the community as a whole, experience benefits that extend far beyond producing a well-
educated group of young people. However, the Leadership for rural school–community partnerships project shows that the level of maturity of the school–community partnership dictates how schools and communities go about developing and sustaining new linkages. For example, key players in the leadership process tend to adopt a more directive and initiating role in developing school–community partnerships in communities which do not have a strong history of working together (that is, in communities at the early stage of developing school–community partnerships), compared with the more facilitative role adopted by key players in schools and communities with well-developed linkages. This indicates that there is no ‘one size fits all’ process for developing effective partnerships. Rather, the leadership process is situational, as Falk & Smith (forthcoming) propose, in that it must take into account issues such as the school’s and community’s history of working together; the availability, capacity, and willingness of people to play a role in the leadership process; and the nature of the problem or opportunity that is driving the school–community linkage.

Outcomes

The three projects demonstrate that outcomes of effective partnerships include superior education and training outcomes, savings from shared resources, increased and better informed demand from clients (individuals, enterprises, and communities), and identified, accessible training pathways for clients. Whilst these tangible outcomes are important to the sustainability of many rural communities, the potentially more valuable outcome from partnerships is increased individual and community capacity to influence their own futures: better community response to change that leads to enhanced social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Leadership for effective partnerships is a shared process where many people play a part, consistent with the writings from education and community development (for example Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Barker, 1997; Lane & Dorfman, 1997). Formal leaders (such as Principals and office holders in community bodies) are key players, but others, people we have termed ‘boundary crossers’ who speak the languages of the school or educational institution and the community, are also important. As projects evolve, leadership passes from a core initiating group to a larger group, representative of the diversity of the community. Effective leadership of partnerships is the collective responsibility of the educational institutions and the whole community which must actively seek opportunities to involve all sectors of the community, including those who would not normally have contact with the educational institutions. Effective leadership depends on the availability and willingness of a wide variety of individuals to involve themselves in the leadership process. There is no ‘one size fits all’ process for developing effective partnerships. Rather, the leadership process is situational, as Falk & Smith (forthcoming) propose, in that it must take into account issues such as the school’s and community’s history of working together, the availability, capacity and willingness of people to play a role in the leadership process, and the nature of the problem or opportunity that is driving the school–community linkage.
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