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Abstract

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Abstract

Like Janus, conformity has two faces. On one face, conformity allows social cohesion to accomplish mission-specific activities. On the other face, conformity in educational leadership can entail a three-part cost against human development. First, education leaders may lose the capacity to ground ethics in objectively valuable sources. This is an effect of formal and informal institutional incentive structures and pressures leaders of virtue to become managers of demand. Second, conformity signals to institutional actors that authentic reform might be too costly to one's professional career. Third, conformity signals that bureaucracies are not merely locations of special interests, but they are also locations of information dissipation in decision-making. All of these combine to show that the institution of education suffers a significant loss of creativity and innovation, making leadership a difficult occupation. A discussion of reliable remedies for practice follows.

The Modern Ethical Leader as the Effective Leader

This is an article about the less obvious obstructions to ethical leadership and the limits to education reform. Any time recent theories of education reform have sought wider autonomy in decision-making, centering ethical reform in a local decision-maker such as a school principal, they have typically been thwarted by institutional rules and their central control (Angus, 1997). The tenacious grip of political interests and factions has had remarkable survivability, as have Rawls's (1955) procedural rules that attempt to regulate practice (tightly coupling practice to narrow rule-sets), both requiring a central authority to umpire conflict. Political scientist Terry Moe (2003) observes further that "with rare exceptions, reforms that make it through the political process tend to be those that are acceptable to established interests and that leave the fundamentals—and problems—of the current system intact" (p. 56). Looking at education reform and the reformer without taking account of the institution ignores important operative variables. Institutional economist Doug North (1990), for example, suggests that while institutional change is possible, institutional stability is a competing interest: "Stability is accomplished by a complex set of constraints that include formal rules nested in a hierarchy, where each level is more costly to change than the previous one" (p. 83). As with many large-scale institutions, education tends to support conformity not transformation; its movements are incremental, sometimes glacial, not punctuated and fluid. Conformity in actor dispositions, in professional practices and in policy discussions may not be the desired or intended outcome of reform-minded actors, but it is too often the unintended outcome; as political and social theorists suggest, group think is self-reinforcing.

Conformity occurs because the educational leader cannot readily bring about an alternative ethical framework. Because wider community recognition is conditioned by and rooted in institutional rules and patterns of practice, change requires both a heroic effort, including bearing a potential cost to one's career, as well as political and entrepreneurial skill. The alternative ethical framework may possess sufficient depth and legitimacy to the local learning community, but because it runs contrary to the wider rule-set alternative ethical frameworks are less likely to capture agenda. While a local community may tolerate some change at the margins here or there, the institution of education at all levels tends to resist and confine any transforming impulses by its actors (Rodriguez, Loomis, and Weeres 2007). The norm-maintaining institution restricts transformational change because in most cases significant change entails risk: it would bring about higher levels of uncertainty, possibly radical alterations in existing rules and within relations, and perhaps even bring about a diminishment or end to certain interest groups within the institution. The risk averse

environment of course has been true of institutions for centuries. The present reality, however, suggests that theories of educational leadership in the U.S. today are not in fact ethically transformational, but embrace institutional conformity. We who train leaders as well as the leaders themselves talk about ethical reform, yet the rhetoric does not match performance; conformity conscripts intention to perform according to the rules of the game (Coase 1994).

In a 2005 edition of Education Week an advertisement recruiting principals to turn around schools in New York City read, "The NYC [New York City] Leadership Academy is working to build a team of great principals who are strong transformational and instructional leaders…[they] will be the key to improving overall school and student performance and will inspire teachers, students and parents in urban public schools to reach their highest potential" (2005, p. 43). This is not dissimilar to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau deemed the highest calling of the political leader when he identified education as key to national strength and stability. Rousseau (1947) said, "He who dares to undertake the formation of a people must feel himself capable of changing human nature itself, and of transforming each individual" (p. 228). Current theorists find it difficult to agree on what Ethical Leadership is, but they have little difficulty defining what Ethical Leadership does. The Ethical Leader will develop and sustain positive change to transform individuals thereby transforming the society in which they live. This was the basis for Rousseau's statement and is the basis for the advertisement in Education Week. The NYC Leadership Academy wants leaders who will not only inspire the education process, but will also arouse the surrounding community so it may reach a level of success in human development not attainable before the transformation.

Many leadership theorists center their arguments in what leaders do (their action) rather than on whom leaders are (their character), making theories of Ethical Leadership pragmatic and utility-driven rather than seeking deeper ethical questions around human development. One of the most popular modern leadership theorists is Michael Fullan. Fullan authored many books on leadership in business and education and is a leading thinker on educational leadership. For brevity, we will use Fullan as the archetypal theorist in this area. In his book Leading in a Culture of Change (2001), Fullan simplifies his widely accepted view of ethical leadership as effective leadership, and in a follow up work entitled, The Moral Imperative of School Leadership (2003) he further develops his understanding of moral purpose as coming from the moral imperative of public education. Here, according to Fullan (2001), leadership "is not mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve, but to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed" (p. 3). According to the theory, moral purpose causes the leader to be ethical, by which he means "acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers and society as a whole" (p. 3). For Fullan, an ethical leader is a person who helps people to confront their problems thus allowing the problems to be solved by the people involved in a specific community, which will make a positive difference in their lives. He ascribes to these leaders the adjective "effective" because they have caused "more good things to happen and fewer bad things to happen" (p. 11).

In summary, leadership, if it is to be effective, has to (1) have an explicit 'making-a-difference' sense of purpose, (2) use strategies to mobilize many people to tackle tough problems, (3) be held accountable by measured and debatable indicators of success, and (4) be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment, which is none other than mobilizing of everyone's sense of moral purpose. (p. 20)

For many leaders and administrators in education Fullan's ideas carry great weight and influence. His ideas make sense, seem reasonable and are probably attainable in the right institutional environment. But there may be a miscalculation for leaders who hold to and practice Fullan's model of leadership, especially if they regard it as an adequate ethical model of leadership. Central weaknesses of such models are, first, a failure to account for the myriad dimensions and effects of a norm-maintaining institution on the dispositions and practices of leadership. Second, the model places inordinate hope in a common moral imperative (and framework) between leaders, participants, and communities to jointly focus on difficult problems (e.g., social injustices and inequalities) and develop ethically substantive solutions. In this respect, it is predictable that a weakened sense of moral imperative rooted within the current framework of leader production

readily succumbs to institutional conformity. It tolerates and even unknowingly contributes to social injustices (e.g., the expansion of social inequalities). This is a highly controversial thing to say, but without purposeful ethical leadership centered within a common, transcendent moral framework (Spears and Loomis, 2007) the model cannot match the force of institutional conformity moving in the opposite direction.

As today's expansion of social inequalities between groups of people indicates, schooling today—largely subject to a technical model of production (Rodriguez et al., 2007)—is presently incapable of rejecting and expelling what is degrading and enslaving. The brief history of conformity suggests why this is so. The social theorists Max Weber, George Mead, and Erving Goffman each chronicled various social and psychological reasons why people conform to their environments. Weber (1997) suggested that it was through a rational response to a centrally controlled bureaucracy and division of labor; Mead (1934) suggested that it was impulses acting in accord with the organic conditions of environment; and Goffman (1959) thought that it was a characteristic of impression management through skilled theatrical conformity within societal norms. More recently, Ritzer (rev. 2004) suggests that as institutions expand, they will increasingly use rational principles to manage growth; as with the fast-food restaurant McDonalds (Ritzer's principal example), they will franchise like-units of production that operate under the same standardized rules of rationalization. People serving within such institutions naturally, even quite rationally, respond to those formal and informal incentives. And scale and scarcity strip out all other incentives that operate contrary to this rational direction. The institution not only sorts out valuable information in processes of production, it also sorts out leaders of virtue and replaces these with managers of demand (Tyack and Hansot, 1982). In this regard, Fullan (2003) appears to take for granted the power of institutional conformity in public education:

Everyone, ultimately, has a stake in the caliber of schools, and [that] education is everyone's business. The quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life that people enjoy…with a strong public education system as the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society. (p. 7)

It is a reliable assumption today that institutional conformity affects the production processes of education, incrementally reducing the quality of education not enhancing it (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Rodriguez et al., 2007). By extension, conformity to the procedural rules of educational production reduces the quality of life by making the education good appear simple in nature, a good whose production is easily managed by the right technique (Ellul 1964) and bureaucracy (Weber 1997). One clear example is when student identity and value is reducible to a test score or fungible to financial gains in the average-daily-attendance accounting of students. Dewey saw this long ago and remarkably anticipated our present situation: "We know that our present scheme of industry requires at hand a large supply of cheap, unskilled labor. We know that this precludes special training: that education which should develop initiative, thoughtfulness and executive force would not turn out recruits for our present system. And, if we are honest, we know that it is not intended that these shall be turned out in numbers except such as may be required to take charge of running the machinery to which the masses are subordinate" (pp. 288-289). Yet conformity to prevailing institutional information in curricula, pedagogy, and policy is incompatible with human complexity; and complexity is what human education is all about. In times past, taking account of complexity in education was a paramount leadership obligation (Tyack and Hansot 1982). That is not true today; procedural uniformities lift this obligation by regulating management through hierarchical rules enforced by bureaucracy, effectively socializing risk out to a group and not lodging it into any particular leader; this way no one person is assigned accountability.

There is, of course, a significant cost buried in how education is produced today. This cost is both seen (e.g, in inequality) and unseen (e.g., an underproduction of the good). Hank Levin's (2005) work at Columbia University, including the working paper from Levin's symposium, "The Social Costs of Inadequate Education," reveals in financial terms these costs (multiple billions of dollars). Social inequalities in certain segments of the U.S. population (e.g., between Latinos and Whites; Fry, 2005) are expanding or remaining static, not declining, thus calling into question linkages and franchising by Fullan and others of public education's relationship to civility, prosperity, and democracy. Charles Glenn (1988) has dealt with this misconception of public education in his historical analysis of

the common school movement in the United States, Netherlands and France. Glenn notes the original consensus built around the moral imperative of virtue is different than today's moral pluralism:

The difference is that, in Horace Mann's day, the moral objectives of the school were essentially congruent with those of the public, but this is no longer the case. Mann drew upon a consensus of right and wrong that, as he often pointed out, was largely independent of the diverse religious convictions of the times…This consensus on the moral content of education no longer exists. (p. 8)

Implications for the Development of Ethical Leadership

For an effective leader to develop transformational change within a norm-maintaining institution a structural loosening to modest market1 mechanisms is needed in order to disperse and differentiate decision-making (Sowell, 1980). New Zealand, for example, decentralized its institution of education with promising results (Thrupp and Smith, 1999). The direction of information within public education system in the U.S. is not organized around principles of decentralization, principles still available within market structures and the types of accountability generally arising from market forces (though these too are progressively disappearing2). U.S. public education is insulated from liberal market principles and sources, creating a system more capable of protecting status quo political interests than in transformational change at any level: individual, school or societal. Politicians and others maintain the institutional status quo by seeking to keep the most powerful groups happy in order to secure gains (e.g., reelection); boards of education retain power by supporting and rubber stamping administrative agenda; unions protect against change through collective bargaining, generous retirement arrangements, and protective tenure laws; all parties make a deal and families affixed to the system for a lack of other opportunities conform to the incentives set before them (Weeres, 1993).

In a now famous paper, John Chubb and Terry Moe (1986) explain best the nature of the public education system as a norm-maintaining institution. They deserve to be cited at some length.

Public schools, then, are largely sheltered from market forces. They are sectoral monopolists within their own districts, they draw students from a semi-captive constituency, and the number of students they attract is not highly sensitive to changes in the quality of education they provide. They are sheltered even further by the fact that their funding comes from political authorities via taxation, not from parents as a fee for services rendered. Thus, financial "rewards" are largely separated from school performance. Parents may complain about the quality of education, and some may even pull their children out, but the financial well-being of the schools is determined by the policies of politicians and administrators, many of whom are quite far removed from the local school. And the democratically ordained constituency to which they respond is far larger and less directly affected than the school's relatively small set of parents and students. (p. 9)

The cost of negative forms of conformity in educational leadership is twofold. First, leaders lose the capacity to make decisions in conflict with institutional incentive structures and this tends to turn leaders of virtue into mere managers of demand. Second, conformity has roots that run deep within the information economy of the institution, which signals that bureaucracies are not merely locations of special interests, but are also locations of information dissipation. Both of these combine to show that the institution suffers a significant loss of creativity and innovation (Freire, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), which hampers valuable entrepreneurial activity (Schumpeter, 1950). Correcting this structural problem is no easy matter. Nonetheless, we propose three areas where authentic reevaluation might bring about transformational change within the system of education, thus allowing school administrators to be ethical and transformational leaders. For space reasons this is not the place to fully explicate the details of the suggestions or unpack the implications of the changes (that would take a book), but it does allow us to propose initial ideas to spur the development of Ethical Leadership.

First, there must be structural changes made to public education that allow some measures of accountability to modest, liberal market forces. A market and its assumption of self-interest are thought by many educationists to contradict a free and public education. However, there is another way to look at a market:

as producing a complex informational environment that is sensitive to the free, voluntary and responsible interactions among individuals and between individuals and groups (Rothbard, 2005). As such, a market can liberalize an institution from intransigent interests and, at the same time, is highly accountable to a broader range of participants (including teachers, parents and students). In fact, as Hess (2004) has properly noted, a thoughtfully arranged market can open an institution like education to new leadership talent; not one specifically built along a profit motive (or its equivalent in test scores), rather one that can attract talented people who understand the human complexity of education. Many proponents of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) get excited about the new accountability rules of mandatory testing, but this system with its bureaucratic regulations gives a false sense of accountability. Whether a school "Meets Expectations" or "Does Not Meet Expectation" matters less when the expectations are fiercely narrow in range; unless there is a diversity of provision built into the system, expectations will remain tightly uniform. Adding layers of bureaucracy leads a system more prone to the negative forces of conformity. Breaking loose from entrenched bureaucratic practices tends to liberate decision making where accountability and opportunity may be assumable where they belong: closer to the actual point of exchange in the production of the good.

Second, leadership training and education preparation programs should be reformed to allow variation in decision-making. Chubb and Moe affirm, "The key to effective education rests with unleashing the productive potential that is already present in schools and their personnel" (p. 187). This positive hope seems muddled when considering the forthright analysis of Arthur Levine's report, Educating School Leaders (2005). He laments over this fact:

The field of educational administration is deeply troubled…The result is a field rooted neither in practice nor research, offering programs that fail to prepare school leaders for their jobs, while producing research that is ignored by policy makers and practitioners and looked down on by academics both inside and outside of education schools. (p. 61)

Levine collapses these problems into the previous systemic problem by saying, "These weaknesses are exacerbated by public school policies that tie teacher and administrator salaries to longevity on the job and the accrual of graduate credits and degrees" (p. 61). Perhaps some combination of educational change will bring about significant change in the preparation process of our leaders. Levine even suggests that "it would be best if education schools and their educational administration programs took the lead in bringing about improvement" (p. 69). This also could be problematic considering the current state of education schools and the academic conformity within these programs as described by Hess and Kelly (2005):

Preparation programs seem particularly unprepared to help principals tackle the challenges of leading… Programs are training principals to do the things they have traditionally been empowered to do-monitor curricula, support and encourage faculty, manage facilities, and so on-but do little to equip them to take advantage of tools newly available to school leaders… resulting in micromanagement, poor decisions or the misuse of accountability instruments. (p. 40)

Nevertheless, education schools and training programs must take the lead by creating their own change. They should develop a broad and rigorous curriculum and program based on the best research and data with an emphasis on what education can learn from other areas of academia (Labaree, 2004). Education schools can set higher standards for the applicants into these programs. This may seem elitist, but evidence from Levine's study strongly supports the claim that education schools have low standards and accept low achievers (Clifford and Guthrie, 1988). Tightening entrance requirements will have fewer people obtaining doctoral degrees, which works against degree-inflation of the institution of education and works against expanding the highly popular Ed.D. programs.

Finally, there is something to be said for effective leadership and those leaders within the context of the current situation. Chubb and Moe (1990) suggest that "effective schools seem to be headed by principals who have a clear vision of where they are going…" (p. 84). Therefore, it is important for leaders to develop a clear transformational vision. Unlike Fullan's expectation to tap into people's moral imperative, Chubb and Moe seem to suggest that the leader develops the vision for the system under their span of control. Their research shows that "principals in academically successful schools gave higher priority to gaining control

over their school's curriculum, gaining control over their school's personnel, and gaining control over their school's policies" (p. 84). This conclusion has held up over time (U.S. DoE, 2002).

Conclusion: The Courage to Transform

The capturing of information and agenda requires a certain measure of political cache and entrepreneurial skill. How does cultural change occur? On the supernatural level, fervent individual and community prayer (Matt. 5-6) and diligent and integral training of the mind (Phil. 2:5) coupled with just action (Ps. 4; Is. 1; Mich 6:8) helps to change individuals and societies. On the natural level in terms of setting forth a new and more just equilibrium for the institution of education, Nobel economist Doug North (2005, pp. 106-107) traces one procedure for incremental change that is a plausible model for schools of education. It proceeds thus:

1. A set of…entrepreneurs articulate a new set of be liefs in fundamental conflict with the existing order—beliefs that are held, at first, by a small minority.
2. The opponents of these entrepreneurs act in ways [radical opposition, etc.] that make these beliefs appear true, thus confirming the revolutionary be liefs in the eyes of pivotal players. Thus events be yond the direct control of the new ideas proponents occur that lend some credence to these beliefs.
3. The result is a spread of the beliefs to some of the pivotal decision makers. When the pivotal decision makers accept the radically new beliefs, they provide sufficient political support for radical action.

In addition, command over information and the parameters of leadership must be rooted in something other than one's self (e.g., a charisma or power); it must be girded by the restraining vigor of a legitimate and reliable moral force. C.S. Lewis (1943) explains it best when he argues for an adherence to the Tao in his book The Abolition of Man3. Lewis writes,

Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the Tao, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own "natural" impulses. Only the Tao provides common human law of action which can overarch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery. (p. 21)

Lewis's proposal of adherence to the Tao more accurately aligns genuine leadership with reality than does the popular model of effective leadership. Lewis argues that the leader must derive his or her purpose, vision and power from the unchanging Tao rather than from institutional trends, special interests, or the leader himself and herself. The Tao creates opportunity for transformation to occur in the direction of human flourishing because it sets people free to seek legitimate change rather than merely responding to a hyper-ordinate system or tethered to a sort of professional servitude.

To be authentically ethical, leaders must search for, find, and then lead within the Tao and adhere to the demanding requisites of objective ethics. Doing so will center human and social capital development in the best ideals of humanity, as well as to constrain inhuman structures and rules. When an educational leader does this, they arguably possess greater liberty of action to do the right thing; they have an opportunity to amend the values, vision and objectives of the greater institution—as well as the modes, methods, and missions of individual schools—making these transparently and transformatively ethical. This is the platform from which to build higher-performing schools and develop transformational change. Where Fullan's leader is likely to conform, particularly under the crushing press and power of institutional rules, Lewis's leader may yet succeed because s/he understands, operates without fear and has unleashed the transforming power of the Tao (for a parallel argument, see King, 1986).

Notes

1. By market, we do not mean principles of business. There is far too much of that occurring in education today. Rather, by market we mean the information market that exists in all public and private institu tions. Liberalizing these will allow for more infor mation and greater freedom of decision-making.

2. There is a public-private convergence occurring across all markets of information, leaving progressively little to distinguish public institutions from

private ones. See Rodrigues et al., The Cost of Institutions.

3. Lewis here is speaking about the first principles of moral law to which all are subject. He writes that this natural law "in all its forms, Platonic, Aristote lian, Stoic, Christian, Oriental alike, I shall hence forth refer to for brevity simply as, 'the Tao'". (p. 31).

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