Case Study: Applying Leadership Theories to School-based Problems

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**A Summary of the Problem of Practice**

At John F. Kennedy Secondary School, Principal Aiden Raul utilizes a participatory leadership style which changed a once toxic culture at his school. He builds trust, engenders a sense of collective responsibility, and creates a culture of collaboration among staff. This year the professional development (PD) committee created plans for the staff development day based on consensus. However, Doreen Esteves, a well-respected, hard-working teacher, and chair of the PD committee, informed Aiden that faculty members of the science department formulated an alternative idea which energized and motivated the entire staff. Doreen organized alternative preparations for the new staff development day and assured Aiden that 100% of the staff voted in favour of the new plans. The problem of practice facing Aiden is the following:  1) the PD committee (which includes himself) did not have the opportunity to discuss these changes 2) district administration are unaware of these changes 3) Aiden was concerned with how his administrative colleagues might perceive these changes.

**Selected Leadership Theories and Rationale: Servant and Authentic Leadership**

A servant-leader is primarily altruistic focusing exclusively on supporting the needs of his/her followers such that those “being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (Northouse, 2016, p. 226). This can only occur when servant leaders listen, show empathy, are attuned to their environments, use persuasion to effect change, provide a clear sense of direction, anticipate the future, take responsibility for the organization, commit to helping others develop, and build community (Northouse, 2016, pp. 227- 229). Authentic leadership, an alternative leadership approach, requires that a leader is guided by a firm set of ethical standards. These values inform and permeate both the leader's actions and words. One theory of authentic leadership states that an authentic leader understands him/herself, follows a strict set of values, evaluates different perspectives in the decision-making process, and openly present his/her true self (Northouse, 2016).

Servant leadership was chosen as a lens to examine this case study because of the paradox the case presents. The Principal, as both a servant-leader and an agent of the board, is required to negotiate a highly contradictory position since the needs of his followers are in opposition to the needs of the board. Similarly, by applying the authentic leadership approach to our case study, complications emerge that allow for a multifaceted problem-solving opportunity. For example, if Aiden values the efforts of the Board (particularly if PD is designed to advance the Board Improvement Plan) and yet values a participatory, democratic dialogue, how might he negotiate these contradicting set of values?

**The Problem of Practice as Seen through Servant and Authentic Leadership Lenses**

As a servant leader at JFK High School, Principal Raul would often get requests to chat. Northouse (2016) describes the act of putting followers first as the “defining characteristic” (p. 234) of servant leadership.  Putting his own tasks aside, Aiden invites Mrs. Esteves, into his office.  In the original case, Aiden is informed of changes to the pre-arranged professional development session.  It can be argued that the servant leader would not see the proposed change as problematic. Aiden is aware of the social environment in which he works: The staff avoided taking risks and displaying initiative in leadership opportunities under the previous school leadership.  He is also aware that opinions and thoughts about professional development are diverse and not always positive.  After eight years of modelling servant leadership, Aiden would expect teachers to take initiative and would not be surprised that a change had been made.  Moreover, data demonstrated that there was overwhelming support for the new professional development strategy. Aiden’s support for the new plan would demonstrate his commitment to the growth of people within his organization.  In addition to giving staff opportunities for leadership, the change of plan demonstrates that Aiden and his staff have developed a culture with shared interests.  After all, the survey revealed unanimous support for the new plan.

With eight years’ experience in his current role, Aiden’s approach as a servant leader would be not be new to the district administration nor to his administrative colleagues. Therefore, they would likely predict that his plans might change. However, as a servant-leader, Aiden would not be concerned with the opinions of the district administration or his colleagues because his leadership philosophy puts his followers before the school board.

                As an authentic leader, Aiden demonstrates positive psychological capacity through the way he deals with staff and students.  Understanding the positional power that he has and its potential impact on people, Aiden chooses to sit at the board table rather than behind his desk.  He has displayed his desire for strong relationships and making connections with others. Gorlewski, Gorlewski, & Ramming (2013) would describe Aiden as one who “believed in seeking consensus through genuine dialogue,” and as creating a climate where “the whole school benefited from the shared decision-making model” (p. 67) thus revealing his values. These morals would guide his decision making, thus, he would not be concerned with how his administrative colleagues would perceive the PD changes.  Northouse (2016) describes balanced processing as “an individual’s ability to analyze information objectively and explore other people’s opinions before making a decision” (p. 203).  As an authentic leader, Aiden demonstrates evidence of balanced processing when he “leaned back in his chair, hoping to conceal his reaction and buy some time to think,” thanked Mrs. Esteves for her leadership and said “let’s meet later today to discuss this further” (Gorlewski et al., 2013, p. 68).

**Strengths and Drawbacks of the Servant and Authentic Leadership Approaches**

Drawing on the strengths of a servant leadership approach, Aiden cultivates respect for his team by supporting their wishes of changing the PD direction. He provides organizational support for innovation and exemplifies open communication. In addition, Aiden provides Doreen with opportunities for self-development, actively preparing his follower for a leadership position. Aiden’s support for this new initiative exhibits his ability to provide the staff with autonomy.

Some positive outcomes of his actions include the development of followers’ self-efficacy, organizational commitment, work environment satisfaction and empowerment. While Aiden gives up control, he attends fully to the needs of the followers (Northouse, 2016). From a deficit perspective, the servant leadership approach could jeopardize organizational goals and the leader’s personal objectives. Moreover, the needs of one stakeholder may conflict with others, creating tension between the growth of the followers and organizational needs of the district. Because the organizational culture is not considered, there is minimal focus upon system cohesion and board accountability.

From an authentic leadership lens, this approach has several positive effects. Aiden demonstrates that trusting relationships are paramount and he creates a climate that provokes mutual trust and respect. Aiden’s authentic leadership style is grounded in ethics and positive psychological qualities (Northhouse, 2016).  Aiden’s behaviours are coherent and followers know what to expect of their leader. Ultimately, this consistency provides security and reinforces their commitment to trust his decisions. Aiden's behaviour affects follower attitudes and behaviours through psychological capital and trust (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009). Furthermore, Aiden takes time to objectively analyze relevant data before drawing conclusions, which illustrates an internalized moral perspective, characteristic of authentic leadership. He also demonstrates balanced processing guided by internal moral standards rather than those of the organization or of society. Because authentic leaders act on their strong values and convictions (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), Aiden who “always put students first and believed in consensus through genuine dialogue” (Gorlewski et al., 2013, p. 67) would try to understand his follower’s purpose, that of the board, and the impact on student learning. Finally, Aiden demonstrates relational transparency: presenting an individual’s authentic self and sharing of one’s feelings while minimizing displays of inappropriate emotions (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). He seems sincere and open while controlling his initial reactions when Doreen presents the idea and this creates a safe environment where people can take risks.

Drawbacks to the authentic leadership approach include the notion that the leader is not solely responsive to the desires and needs of others as this may affect organizational goals, create a deviation from the course of action, and may not allow the leader to make decisions for the organisation for fear of offending followers. Aiden considers the mission and the organization over self-interest and concentrates upon long term organizational goals as opposed to the faculty’s short-term needs. Moreover, if Aiden's values include a participatory leadership philosophy and he decides against the initiative, he could compromise followers' trust in him; for leaders to be considered truly authentic by followers, followers must perceive them to be authentic. Therefore, authentic leadership is a function of followers' perception. One final drawback is that the authentic approach focuses on the leader rather than the followers.

**References**

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