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Transformational Leadership in Uncertain Times

In a crisis, the best response is often the most counterintuitive.

As schools everywhere were forced to navigate the sudden shift to remote learning in March 2020, superintendents shared with me that they were observing a peculiar phenomenon among principals: Many who had been star performers prior to the pandemic were now the ones struggling most mightily to lead their schools. Why should that be? How did so many formerly competent leaders suddenly become incompetent?



The answer likely reflects something we learned back in driver's education: When road conditions change, we need to apply different, and sometimes counterintuitive, driving skills, like laying off the brakes on an icy patch or steering into a skid. Similarly, when schools encounter changing conditions, leaders need to apply skills that may feel counterintuitive.

First, let's consider two distinct types of "road conditions" that organizations experience. Years ago, Heifetz and Laurie (2001) observed that organizations tend

to encounter one of two types of change: (1) *technical problems*, which are readily diagnosed and solved with existing know-how, and (2) *adaptive challenges*, which are far more complex, with unclear causes and no playbook or toolkit to use to solve them.

In schools, finding a better way to track and report attendance data would be an example of a technical problem. Leaders can easily frame the problem: How can we simplify and automate these processes? Solutions are readily available—like purchasing attendance-tracking software—and a leader's response is straightforward: Review options, decide on a course of action, allocate resources, and ensure people use the software.

On the other hand, making a massive, abrupt transition to remote learning was an *adaptive challenge*—arguably the Mt. Everest of adaptive challenges. It required rapid rethinking of the entire enterprise of schooling with no playbook to follow. And it required leaders to take a different approach to leadership.

Understanding Leadership Styles

Research suggests leaders typically employ two (maybe three) different approaches to leadership (Hameiri, Nir, & Inbar, 2014; Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims, 2013). The first is top-down and directive (sometimes referred to as *transactional*): Leaders focus on clarifying demands, assigning roles and responsibilities, solving problems to avoid risks, or monitoring implementation and compliance. The second approach is bottom-up and empowering (sometimes referred to as *transformational*): Leaders focus on inspiring others with a compelling forward-looking vision, encourage risk taking, and support personal change. Arguably, there's a third style—what I'd call *passive, laissez faire leadership*, which amounts to leaders keeping their heads down and avoiding trouble. But that's hardly the stuff of

journal articles, TED talks, or airport bookstore bestsellers.

Teams with directive leaders initially outperform those with empowering leaders. Yet over time, teams with empowering leaders continue to learn and improve. Eventually, their performance surpasses that of teams with directive leaders (Lorinkova et al., 2013). A study of 142 small businesses (Wallace et al., 2010) found that those with leaders who adopted a so-called *promotion focus*—encouraging innovation and new ideas to achieve ambitious goals—outperformed those with leaders who had a *prevention focus*—cautiously fixating on preventing errors. While prevention may work in stable environments, where doing business as usual is warranted, it's often ill-suited to dynamic and uncertain environments, where new ideas and rapid change are paramount.

Encountering Uncertain Conditions

Times of uncertainty and rapid change require leaders to adopt a more bottom-up and empowering leadership style. Yet that's not how most leaders respond to uncertainty and adaptive challenges, according to a study of nearly 200 school leaders and 1,000 teachers in Israel (a school system fairly similar to the U.S. in terms of structure and economic disparities) (Hameiri et al., 2014).

For the analysis, researchers divided schools into two groups: those outperforming expectations (i.e., high student academic performance with predominately low socioeconomic-status students) and those underperforming expectations (i.e., low achievement with predominately high SES students). They also surveyed principals on their perceived levels of uncertainty, including the amount of information (or lack thereof) they felt they had to do their jobs well

and whether they could predict the consequences of their decisions.

Not surprisingly, most principals reported experiencing ambiguity in their roles—but to different degrees, which allowed researchers to explore a second question: How did leaders respond, in their leadership styles, to varying degrees of uncertainty?

Generally speaking, when confronted with uncertainty, most defaulted to one of two leadership styles—either *passive, laissez-faire* leadership, seeking to avoid risk, or a *directive transactional* style, meaning they used coercion, rewards, and positional authority to ensure compliance. Directive leaders often relied more on their own expertise and less on input from others. As it turns out, neither style was terribly effective.

However, leaders who responded to uncertainty with *transformational* leadership styles—using such “soft” leadership behaviors as showing appreciation and respect for others as well as sharing information and rationale for decision-making—demonstrated significantly greater effectiveness. Such leadership behaviors, in fact, accounted for fully 13 percent of the variance in school performance during times of uncertainty. To put this in perspective, results from a seminal meta-analysis of research on school leadership (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) show that leaders account for, on average, 6 percent of the variance in school performance. This suggests that matching leadership style to school conditions can, in effect, more than double leadership effectiveness.

Adjust to Road Conditions

These findings suggest that it's essential for leaders not only to match their leadership style with current conditions, but also to recognize that their natural responses to

uncertainty—to either clutch the wheel more tightly and engage in harsher, top-down leadership or to pull over and wait out the storm—are both exactly the *wrong* responses.

Instead, it's better to calmly keep your eyes on the road ahead and lean into a mix of top-down and bottom-up leadership behaviors. It's OK (and reassuring to staff) to draw upon your own expertise. Yet it's important to support “bottom-up” change that invites input, creative thinking, risk taking, and shared decision making. Admitting you don't have all the answers during times of crisis may feel counterintuitive. But asking the right questions can empower others to take risks and learn together to power through any obstacles you encounter on the path forward. **E**

References

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