

## Chapter 23: Perception, Prescription, and the Future of School Leadership

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The dilemma is familiar to anyone engaged in the preparation of professionals. Should preparation programs focus on current or anticipated expectations? In many ways, the safer course involves concentrating on what practitioners currently are expected to do. Trying to anticipate future needs invariably entails untested assumptions, inferences, and the risk of error. Continuing to base preparation programs on *current* expectations when those expectations have been found inadequate, of course, is not without risk either. Those in educational administration often deal with the dilemma by hedging their bets and trying to prepare school leaders for today *and* tomorrow, a strategy that sounds far easier than it actually is.

This chapter does not promise a foolproof approach to designing educational administration programs. Rather, it aims

- 1) to clarify how we try to understand leadership in general and school leadership in particular and
- 2) to identify a promising alternative conception of future school leadership to guide educational administration programs.

The assumption is that there exist multiple ways for educational administration specialists to make sense of the leadership needs of schools and that how we do so is not always as productive as it could be.

The opening section presents the basic argument – that the conventional tendency to treat leadership as a descriptive concept can be limiting. A case is made for considering the perceptual and prescriptive aspects of leadership. Perceptual aspects entail the perceived need for leadership and the conditions that are offered to justify the perceived need for leadership. Prescriptive aspects involve the expectations associated with addressing the conditions perceived to necessitate leadership.

Subsequent sections apply this alternative perspective to recent reform literature in education and business. Three questions guide the review and analysis:

1. To what extent do reformers agree on the conditions necessitating organizational change?
2. To what extent do reformers agree on the organizational changes to address these conditions?
3. To what extent do reformers agree on the leadership needs of organizations occasioned by these changes?

The chapter closes with a discussion of the implications of the review and analysis for the preparation of school leaders.

#### UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

How we think about leadership influences how we design and conduct leadership preparation programs. Until recently, leadership has been treated by scholars primarily as a descriptive term (Immegart, 1988). Efforts to understand leadership focused on identifying observable aspects of the phenomenon. Presumed exemplars of leadership, nominated by peers or chosen by researchers using various criteria, were studied in order to isolate key behaviours, functions, and related characteristics. The results of these studies were converted into lists of competencies, proficiencies, and performance standards, which, in turn, guided the preparation, selection, and evaluation of school leaders.

The last few decades have witnessed a modest effort to balance the emphasis on describing leadership with greater understanding of the meanings associated with leadership (Duke, 1986; Leinberger and Tucker, 1991). This effort has been characterized by an interest in leadership as a *perception* (Immegart, 1988, p. 264). Treating leadership as a perception shifted focus from leaders and what they do to observers, including followers, and how they make sense of what leaders do. The frustrating lack of consensus regarding the definition of leadership came to be seen as a natural consequence of the fact that perceptions vary according to individuals' past experiences, current circumstances, and future aspirations. Academic descriptions of leadership seemed to ignore or downplay the variability which characterizes perceptions of leadership in everyday circumstances.

Recently an attempt to extend this thinking has been made by the author (Duke, 1994). The guiding premise is that leadership constitutes a perceived *need* for many, if not most, people. Unlike the needs identified by theorists such as Alderfer (1972), Maslow (1970), and McClelland (1975), however, the focus of the need for leadership resides outside the individual. The need for leadership is associated with external situations and sets of circumstances. As a construct, the *perceived need for leadership* is assumed to vary within and across individuals. For some, the need may be relatively high and relatively constant. Others may perceive a high need for leadership episodically. When direction is clear and commitment is high, for example, the perceived need for leadership may be relatively low (Duke, 1994).

The last observation indicates that the perceived need for leadership requires a companion construct, which might be referred to as *the conditions perceived to necessitate leadership*, or *perceived leadership conditions* for short. A case can be made that leadership cannot be fully understood until the specific conditions under which leadership is perceived to be needed are determined. The perceived need for leadership and perceived leadership conditions make up the *perceptual dimension* of leadership. Studying this dimension of leadership calls for a shift of focus from leaders to followers. This shift is consistent with other recent developments in leadership theory (Rost, 1991, pp. 97-128) and the general increase in interest in symbolic interactionism, constructivism, and critical theory (Schwandt, 1994). Leadership ceases to be solely a matter of mastering a set of general standards or manifesting certain descriptive criteria. Nor does it mean much for leaders themselves to assert that their performance constitutes leadership. Instead, what those in need of or subject to leadership perceive it to be is pertinent. In order to better understand these perceptions of leadership, researchers must identify when individuals perceive the need for leadership to be relatively high or low and determine the specific conditions characterizing these occasions.

To illustrate how the perceptual dimension of leadership can be applied, a review of selected books on education and business reform is undertaken in this chapter. The books were chosen in part because they specified conditions that reformers felt necessitated new forms of organizational leadership. Other selection criteria will be discussed in the next section.

A focus of inquiry in this chapter concerns the extent to which reformers in education and business agree on the conditions that necessitate changes in organizational leadership. If agreement is extensive,

those involved in preparing future school leaders would be wise to attend closely to calls for reform. On the other hand, if perceptions of the need for new leadership and leadership conditions vary widely, a more cautious response might be better.

Deborah Stone (1989) offers a useful way to think about any set of conditions invoked to justify action. Advocates for action, she maintains, develop *causal stories* based on attributions of cause, blame, and responsibility. The conditions cited to necessitate action possess no inherent properties that make them 'more or less likely to be seen as problems' (p. 282). Advocates, in other words, deliberately portray conditions in ways calculated to generate support for their position.

How have advocates of new types of school and business leadership constructed their causal stories? Have they deliberately focused on certain conditions and ignored others? Are the conditions predicted to face tomorrow's schools similar to those for tomorrow's businesses? Some tentative answers to these and related questions will be found in the next section.

The second major aspect of leadership that will guide this review and analysis concerns prescriptions for future leaders. Once education and business reformers identify conditions perceived to be problematic, they typically prescribe changes in organizations and organizational leadership.

The prescriptive aspect of leadership embodies speculation, dreams, values, and sometimes a dose of pragmatism. There can be no such thing as certainty, of course, when individuals a set of predicted conditions. Only time will tell whether particular prescriptions are valid. For present purposes, the task is to assess the extent to which prescriptions for changes in organizations and organizational leadership are similar across selected examples of education and business reform literature. It is possible, for example, that reformers agree on the conditions necessitating change, but not on the prescribed changes themselves. Conversely, they may disagree on leadership conditions, but concur on prescriptions for leadership.

Before beginning the review, a few words about the selection of reform documents are in order. First, only books published since the beginning of 1990 were examined. Second, each book had to include

- 1) a set of conditions perceived by the author or authors to necessitate changes in organizational structure and leadership and
- 2) specific recommendations for organizational change and changes in organizational leadership.

A list of books was compiled through nominations by professors of education and business and an extensive search of the literature.<sup>1</sup> The books listed below represent, in the author's judgment, a representative sample of recent books dealing with the reform of education and business:

*Educational Reform Books*

- Brian J. Caldwell and Jim M. Spinks, *Leading the Self-Managing School*. London: Falmer, 1992.
- Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., *Reinventing Education*. New York: Dutton, 1994.
- Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker. *Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government*. New York: Plume, 1993.
- Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

*Business Reform Books*

- Joseph H. Boyett and Henry P. Conn, *Workplace 2000: The Revolution Reshaping American Business*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- Peter R. Drucker, *Management for the Future*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Charles Handy, *The Age of Unreason*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1990.
- Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker, *The New Individualists*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990.

The books share other similarities besides those associated with the original selection criteria. With the exception of *The New Individualists*, none is based on systematic empirical investigation. Most of the books combine secondary analysis of current literature, descriptions of promising innovations, and straightforward reform advocacy. Another similarity is that the authors tend to be outsiders. In other words, at the time of writing they were not practitioners in the organizations they sought to reform. The authors represent business and education professors, consultants, and researchers. Louis Gerstner, the chairman and

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