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Leadership and organisational effectiveness – lessons to be drawn from education?

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Leadership and organisational effectiveness – lessons to be drawn from education?

Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study was to explore the hypothesis that leadership is critical in driving organisational effectiveness.

Background: The study was carried out in a primary school setting and focuses on a principal (as leader). The school, which will be named St. Senan's for the case study, has had a recognised reputation in the locality as some high profile people, in the public arena attended the school. The organisation structure of the school is a typical tall structure, being overseen by the Christian Brothers' community, who are trustees, and run by a Board of Management. It has a staff of 30 (teachers and special needs' assistants) and a student number of 117.

Methods: A case study methodology was used. Data was collected by interviewing the principal, two teachers, two students and a parent, in this order. A Parents' Council meeting was observed. Document analysis was also carried out on measurements which reflected some critical success factors for the school.

Results: There was an overall agreement that the principal's leadership impacts on organisational effectiveness in the school. There was also a sense of the importance of values and ethos being important in his leadership role.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that leadership is critical in driving organisational effectiveness. However, it is how the leader leads in the context of the organisation setting which is key. In other words it is not possible to take a set of general critical success factors for a school and apply these to any setting. The paper concludes by proposing the use of a quality framework to locate the findings of the case and promote further discussion.

Implications: The paper suggests that lessons can be learnt from the education setting and applied to healthcare.

Keywords: Leadership, organisational effectiveness, ethos, case study.

Introduction and Background

In approaching this case study I decided to move outside my own organisation and my healthcare background so that I would have a more unbiased approach to this hypothesis. I believe that, in doing so; I have been able to ‘think outside the box’ and open my mind to a new set of literature on schools and principals. In reviewing the literature on *leadership* and *organisational effectiveness* there is some difficulty in exploring the link between the two variables without a generally agreed definition of organisational effectiveness. There are problems also associated with measuring the impact of leadership on organisational effectiveness without first deciding on the critical success factors relevant to the particular organisation.

Pounder (2002) believes there is disarray in the organisational effectiveness literature, which has failed to produce a generally accepted notion of effectiveness. One such model that has been used in the business literature is the competing values framework (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983). This framework consists of four models of organisational effectiveness, each one containing a pair of effectiveness criteria described as means and ends (insert Fig 1 here). Organisational effectiveness consists of balancing competing organisational demands which reflect differing views of effectiveness. For example, if there was an emphasis on patient prognosis or student results as an output this might reflect a solely rational view of effectiveness, which is only one dimension of effective organisational performance.

Sometimes school effectiveness and school outcomes are seen as being synonymous. However, Heck (2000) argues for a less biased perspective and prefers a value-added approach as student achievements are significantly affected by their backgrounds and other contextual conditions, such as community factors. Some of the school effectiveness research focuses heavily on measurable outcomes such as high pupil satisfaction ratios and academic progress in the guise of results. Elliott (1997) takes the viewpoint that much of the data on values is lost in these studies because they are measured as performance indicators which are not outcomes that can be predicted. Moreover, values are noted as the key ingredient in the most successful and vibrant companies (Moss Kanter, 2008). Equally in healthcare there is a high reliance on measurable outcomes in judging the success or otherwise of a setting.

Research has been carried out on school improvement and school effectiveness with the focus on principals but their roles in effectiveness have only been included since the 1990s. Cheng (1996) suggests that 'principal' effectiveness can be viewed as internal to school effectiveness while the importance of focusing on external perceptions has been emphasised by Hughes (1999). From a business perspective this differentiation between internal and external influences and approaches is supported by Rodsutti and Sweirczek (2002). They suggest that an internal organisational effectiveness approach is one where its members are highly integrated, information flows smoothly and employees enjoy job satisfaction. In other words the organisation is a 'good place to work' (p.251). The external approach focuses on the organisation's goals and relationships to the environment including how it can exploit the environment in the acquisition of resources. Riordan et al (2005) suggest that a

climate of employment involvement can lead to organisational effectiveness. This is measured through financial performance, turnover rate, and workforce morale. It can be characterised by a work environment where all employees recognise that they have power to make decisions and where information is shared throughout.

For the purpose of this paper the definition proposed for organisational effectiveness is that put forward by Day *et al* (2001) who carried out a case study exploring a 360⁰ multi-perspective on successful school principal-ship. They suggest that principals were effective, not just because of raising students' levels of achievement or favourable inspection reports but because

...they held and communicated clearly visions and values which were shared by all the stakeholders in the school....Their focus was always on the betterment of the young people and staff who worked in their schools. They remained also, against all the odds, enthusiastic and committed to learning.

This definition could be applied to nurse leaders in healthcare. According to Day *et al* (2001) effective leadership was both a highly contextualised and relational construct. In exploring the qualities of these principals the authors suggest that their practices were underpinned by core personal values such as respect, fairness, equality, whole development of students and staff, integrity and honesty. Day *et al* (2001) suggest that their values and visions were more moral based (dedicated to the welfare of staff and students) than instrumental (economic). The most important aspect of leadership for these principals was working successfully with people and not just a 'desk job' (p.45).

Again it is easy to see similarities here with the nurse leader who is dedicated to the welfare of staff and patients. Burton *et al* (2005) carried out a case study exploring the impact of principal leadership and the overall effectiveness of the school. Using a range of data collection tools, from questionnaires to interviews and documentary analysis, their findings suggest that the principal does have a direct effect on the effectiveness of the school but some senior management members expressed a desire for increased autonomy to systematise key processes throughout the school to build leadership capacity.

Leithwood has been studying and developing school leadership for over forty years. In recent research Leithwood *et al* (2006: 23) stress that a key factor for these leaders was the availability of opportunities to ‘continuously discuss and examine programs and practices, to incorporate feedback...to nurture the network...and otherwise act as a steward of the mission’. If leadership is critical to developing organisational effectiveness then the characteristics of such leadership warrants investigation. Ancona *et al* (2007: 94) suggest that

No one person could possibly stay on top of everything...Only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete - as having both strengths and weaknesses - will they be able to make up for their missing skills by relying on others.

According to McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) principals are in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in schools. They suggest that effective principals spread and develop leaders across the school, thereby

creating a critical mass of distributed leadership for the present and the future.

Spillane (2006) developed a distributed perspective on school leadership framed as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, e.g. principals, followers and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines. According to Spillane (2006: 5) ‘...school leadership does not begin and end with the person in the principal’s office’.

He posits that questions of effectiveness and direction of influence must be separated from leadership itself. Spillane (2006) suggests that leadership refers to activities which are core to the organisation and are designed by the members of the organisation to influence the motivation, knowledge, and practices of other organisational members. In addition, the responsibility for leadership functions and routines can occur by default where classroom teachers identify areas of leadership which are lacking and step in to fill a vacuum. Defining leadership chiefly in terms of outcome, is problematic, according to Spillane (2006) because he believes it can occur without evidence of its outcome.

Ancona *et al* (2007) have further developed a model of distributed leadership focusing on four capabilities: sensemaking (understanding the context in which a company and its people operate), relating (building relationships within and across organisations), visioning (creating a compelling picture of the future), and inventing (developing new ways to achieve the vision). Spanning the interpersonal and intellectual, the rational and intuitive, conceptual and creative capacities they suggest that it is rarely, if ever, someone will be equally skilled in all four capabilities. Ruth (2006) believes that having a vision is a key feature of effective leadership. He suggests that it is the clarity of the vision they have evolved about the future of the organisation that distinguishes effective leaders. Holding this view of the ‘big picture’ can excite and

inspire people (Ruth, 2006: 7). The role of such a leader is to step back and understand the wider context of what is going on before exercising their full power. This is a model of leadership which can be visualised as an inverted pyramid where the leader is underneath supporting their collaborators to achieve their ends. Ruth (2006) names this model liberation leadership.

According to Goffee and Jones (2005) leadership demands the expression of authenticity. Authentic leaders are like chameleons, capable of adapting to the many situations they face and people they lead without losing sight of their identities.

Goffee and Jones (2005:88) suggest that

Authentic leaders remain focused on where they are going but never lose sight of where they came from.

Some of the challenges facing these leaders are the need for their words to match their actions and finding common ground with people they seek to recruit. Their self-awareness is usually quite good and they are 'comfortable in their skin' (Goffee and Jones (2005:93). Self-awareness is central to emotional intelligence, a concept which is important in leadership and the more complex the job, the more emotional intelligence matters (Goleman, 2002). In other words leaders with high self-awareness typically know their limitations and strengths and welcome constructive criticism. From self-awareness comes self-management. Goleman (2002) suggests that self-management resembles an ongoing inner conversation; it allows mental clarity and concentrated energy demanded of a leader. By staying in control of feelings the leader crafts an environment of trust and fairness. The transparency of self-management

allows integrity or the sense that the leader can be trusted. These leaders can control their own state of mind, managing their own turbulent feelings while allowing the full expressions of positive emotions and can be a key source of the organisation's emotional tone.

Methods

Using the case study as a research strategy can be challenging. However, in describing the case study methodology I particularly like the prescriptive definition put forward by Bassey (2007). According to Bassey (2007: 143) a case study is '...an empirical enquiry which is conducted in a localised boundary of space and time...into interesting aspects...' He provides a number of key descriptors which fit with a rationale for the case study presented here. It focuses on a location (in its natural context) and a defined period of time such that 'sufficient data are collected for the researcher to be able to:

- (a) to explore significant features of the case
- (b) to create plausible interpretations of what is found
- (c) to test for the trustworthiness of these interpretations
- (d) to construct a worthwhile argument or story' (p.143).

Fitting with these characteristics this case study takes place in a School (natural context) over a defined timeframe with its starting point of collecting data, fitting the 'empirical' label. The type of case study carried out for this assignment is explanatory (Yin, 1984) or instrumental (Stake, 1994). It examines a case in order to gain insight into an issue or theory, in this case, 'Leadership is critical in driving organisational

effectiveness'. Case studies have been used to establish cause and effect in research and they have been recognised as having the advantage of observing effects in real contexts. Adelman *et al* (1980) suggest that their particular strength can be linked to their attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right and that they allow readers to judge the implications of the study for themselves. Other strengths associated with case studies are that they speak for themselves, they catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data; they provide insights into other similar cases and can embrace and build in unanticipated events (Nisbet and Watt 1984). In contrast they have also been criticised for being impressionistic and biased (Shaughnessy *et al*, 2003), personal and subjective and results may not be generalisable (Nisbet and Watt 1984). I believed that I would be more alert in exploring a school setting which was out of my comfort zone. This would also help to lessen any bias I might have if I carried out a case study in my own organisation.

This case focuses on a principal (as leader) in a primary school, which has a long established history. In 1888 it was founded by the Christian Brothers as a 'Practising School', where trainee teachers could practise their teaching before being posted to various schools in Ireland and abroad. A new primary school was built in 1964 and was extensively upgraded and refurbished in 2001, with an extension added in 2004. The school, which will be named St. Senan's for this paper, has had a recognised reputation in the locality as some high profile people, in the public arena attended the school. The organisation structure of the school is a typical tall structure, being overseen by the Christian Brothers' community, who are trustees, and run by a Board of Management. It has a staff of 30 (teachers and special needs' assistants) and a student number of 117.

In exploring the premise that 'leadership is critical to developing organisational effectiveness' my case study question was 'What key areas, in the organisation, has there been significant improvements in, directly as a result of leadership? To get as comprehensive a picture as possible I collected data by interviewing the principal, two teachers, two students and a parent, in this order. I also observed a Parents' Council meeting. Data was also collected by document analysis of the mission statement, attendance reports and student numbers, which could reflect some critical success factors for the school.

Mr Price, the principal has worked in St Senan's for the past 31 years. He started off his teaching career here and has been in post as Principal for the past 11 years, five of these have been in a teaching role in addition to his administrative role as Principal. Mr Price shares his office with the school secretary, so when I arrived to interview him he chose the front lobby, beside the stairs as the venue because there was no free office on the morning scheduled. When I asked the teachers and students interviewed how they felt about going to see Mr Price and sometimes having to talk to him on the corridor the responses indicated that this was 'no big issue' for them. One of the comments was that 'there is not the same level of fear for the kids' (Ms Darby) and if a private space is needed 'he will make space' (Ms Taffe). During this interview students and teachers were up and down the stairs. I observed his interaction with the students, knowing them all by first name. The lobby displayed numerous photographs of the students, some of recent awards, some of extra-curricular activities and of recycling initiatives. The walls were brightly coloured in the traditional school colours. There was a book shelf with a sign for 'Book Club' clearly displayed. This

represented one of the many extra-curricular activities in the school. Within the interview I explored the principal's vision and how it fits with the vision of the school. His response to me on vision was that when he took the post he wanted to 'improve the look of the school to boost morale'. He also wanted to 'chase special education'. I followed-up by requesting the mission statement for St Senan's which read:

Our mission is to promote the harmonious development of the whole person in an ethos grounded in Gospel values and in the practical spirituality of Edmund Rice, to enable our pupils to achieve their potential and to equip them with the skills they require to meet the challenges they will face when they leave school.

Leaving aside the religious aspect of this statement I wondered if this could be applied to nursing staff, particularly student nurses in a healthcare setting. This statement was not displayed in the school and Mr Price, himself, indicated that it was somewhat vague. According to Ruth (2006) putting copies of the mission statement or vision plaques on the wall is not sufficient. This does not allow people to have ownership of the vision. If a leader holds an overarching vision, listens to staff, sees their strengths and their struggles the leader can articulate a vision that goes to the heart of what matters to them. Ms Taffe, one of the teachers interviewed, said that Mr Price 'always puts the child first, this is the bottom line. Children are paramount'. When he took up the post of Principal his main goal was to increase the number of students which was then at 140. He also wanted to focus on

...giving a package to parents which included extra-curricular activities, a nicer looking school, more open and welcoming policy and break down barriers.'

Mr Price shared his own vision, which he has had since being a fourth class student, when he wrote an essay which stated that 'when I am a teacher every pupil will like being in school.' He summed up his philosophy as 'making the school friendly and accessible'. Mr Price gave an example of when parents visited a school during his own school days. This was judged as the student 'must be in trouble'. In St. Senans it is the norm for parents to 'meander all over the place' (Mr Price).

This sense of 'open door' is mirrored in the culture and ethos of the school which is documented under the headings of 'Spirituality' and 'Atmosphere'. The latter is described as follows:

The pervading and prevailing atmosphere in the school is, and will continue to be, friendly and open where-

- (a) Lines of communication are always open between pupils, staff and parents;
- (b) Pupils, parents, staff and visitors are treated with respect, courtesy and friendliness
- (c) The school is run on a basis of partnership and co-operation between Principal, staff, parents and Board of Management.

The Parents' Council of the school meets a few times during the year and at least once each term. I observed a very relaxed Parents' Council meeting. This was attended by five parents, Mr Price and one teacher. The meeting was held in the staff kitchen where tea and coffee were available.

In liberation leadership Ruth (2006) intimates that effective leaders model what they preach. They 'walk the talk' (p.22) so that there is consistency between their values, vision, standards and behaviours. This perspective matches what Ms Darby states 'He is not two-faced'. Mr Price described his style as 'people management', with 'hands on'. He believes that his strength is 'buzzing with the kids'. One of the students interviewed stated: 'I respect Mr Price, I look up to him', while another student stated 'He doesn't always follow through on his promises, he forgets. This latter point contradicts Ms Darby's viewpoint 'He follows through on things from staff meetings' and Ms Taffe who states that 'He is like a sponge, he takes everything in. When you think he has forgotten about something he will come back to you later about it'.

When I explored if there is a strategy for the school Mr Price said that there was no official strategy. When he wants to put an initiative into place he goes to the Board of Management meeting with this already planned and it is 'just rubber-stamped'.

However, he said that he will have discussed the initiative with the teachers in the school in detail before seeking this approval. On more than one occasion during the interview Mr Price stated that 'This is a great place to work'. In congruence with this quote Ms Darby, a new teacher in the school, stated that 'he is good with staff and good with kids, he knows how to work the two'. This description resonates with internal effectiveness described by Rodsutti & Swerczek (2002) regarding members

being highly integrated. Turnover of staff may reflect a critical success factor for an organisation. In the school studied there was an average of one staff member leaving a post per year. He contextualised this number with the following:

It is quite demanding here. We have a lot of Special Needs kids. It is a difficult place compared to some schools.

Mr Price admitted that he ‘chased Special Education’. He was initially approached by a member of the community about providing a place for a child with Aspergers’ Syndrome. On further probing this request he realised that he would be able to employ extra teachers if the school facilitated Special Needs children. The increase in teachers brought with it ‘new ideas and initiatives’. According to Ancona *et al* (2007) when working to understand your current environment you need to ask yourself what other options are possible? In pursuing the initiative to facilitate Special Needs children in St Senans the Principal could be seen to demonstrate the capability of inventing. In order to transform a vision of the future into reality leaders need to devise processes that will give it life (Ancona *et al*, 2007). Other examples of inventing are echoed in a parent’s quote that ‘he is always open to new suggestions e.g. fundraising ideas, organising books in a new way’. This was evidenced when I observed the Parents’ Council meeting. One parent suggested asking a sports personality rather than a politician to open the new garden in the school. The suggestion was listened to and agreed by Mr Price as being ‘a great idea’. The boys who were interviewed gave the example of the garden where they are ‘growing potatoes’ and ‘doing new things’. Both teachers gave examples of Mr Price encouraging staff to look at new alternatives.

When I questioned Mr Price about delegating any of his responsibilities to staff at different levels of management he admitted that he did not delegate much. He stated that 'I want to make my mark, my fingerprint'. He suggested that this may be 'a fear of failure' and that he was not sure that others had 'the same enthusiasm as me'. Ms Taffe volunteered that Mr Price 'is a poor delegator but this is not a control thing, it is unselfish'. The parent interviewed suggested that 'he is always working. He is here early in the morning and late in the evening.' The boys interviewed noted that 'he calls into the class everyday unannounced to have a few words'. This was verified by Mr Price who agreed that he likes to 'sense the atmosphere informally'. He carries out most of the administration work outside of school hours. He said that other principals might pre-arrange visits with the teachers but 'this is not my style'.

According to Day *et al* (2001) the most important aspect of leadership for principals in their study was working successfully with people and not just administration. When Mr Price completed his emotional intelligence (EQ) profile his reluctance to delegate was highlighted. Most of the staff also completed their EQ profile and he stated that this was useful in understanding the overall profile of the school's staff. Over the years he noticed the growth in staff numbers (6 in 1997 to 30 in 2008) brought with it personality classes with cliques forming. Mr Price stated that he dealt with these issues 'head on' in bringing all staff together to address the issues. The interviews with the teachers took place in the staff kitchen. One teacher (Ms Taffe) stated that he 'hates friction' among staff. Mr Price, with only five years left before retirement and now wants to put some structures in place to ensure the school continues to be 'a great place to work'. Ms Taffe described her principal as 'leading from the front, a good

role model', while Ms. Darby described him as being 'good with staff and good with kids. He knows how to work the two. He is not two faced'. Mr Price himself admitted 'What you see is what you get'. On questioning the principal about the attributes of him as leader which were most relevant in driving improvements in St Senans he said that he believes in 'bringing people with you rather than ordering them from above'.

The improvements made during Mr Price's principal-ship include the development of Special Education , the opening up of the school to parents and the formation of a Parents Council, building a new library and resource centre, refurbishing the physical appearance of the school completely, joining the School Completion initiative (now at 100%) and an increase in attendance records from 88% to 93%. Ms. Taffe acknowledged that Mr Price is 'very open to new ideas, especially something not mainstream. He encourages staff to look at alternatives'.

I asked both teachers if they believed that the Principal's leadership impacts on organisational effectiveness. Ms Taffe agreed and gave the examples of the development of the Special Needs initiative with the increased intake of these children into the school. This initiative is now followed through to secondary school with the employment of a liaison teacher for the two schools. Mr Price's good relationship with parents was highlighted, by both teachers, as being very effective to the outcome of the school. Ms Taffe suggested that even if parents are 'difficult' he has time for them. She adds 'He is a family man himself'. The parent interviewed agreed 'he is very approachable. You can ask him anything'. Ms Taffe stated that St Senans is a 'happy place to be' and that Mr Price makes it as appealing as possible for kids'. Some of the initiatives highlighted by the students interviewed were the breakfast

club, the healthy food competition, prizes for attendance, new garden and marble competitions. Ms Darby believed that these were ‘fun things’ that get the kids to come to school.

Discussion & Conclusions

The findings from the case study can only be interpreted in the context of this setting but similarities with the healthcare setting can be made. The limitations of the study include the brief period spent in the school by the researcher, the small sample size and the absence of such documents as a strategy or key performance indicators to judge organisational effectiveness. However, the literature reviewed did allude to the importance of outcomes such as values in measuring effectiveness of an organisation. The data presented here gives a strong sense of values being important for this leader and this in turn seems to have some impact on organisational effectiveness. However, I believe there is other criteria and variables, in addition to leadership, in this organisation that impact on its effectiveness. As I reflected on the case I was drawn to the framework of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) (Insert Figure 2 here). This framework can be used across all organisations whether in healthcare or education to frame the findings presented.

EFQM suggests that results with respect to performance, customers (patients or students), people and society are achieved through leadership. This leadership drives policy and strategy, which is delivered through people, partnerships, resources and processes. It is notable, in the EFQM model that the weightings attached to the ‘customer’ results are the highest (20%). If we apply this to St Senans School, these results can be portrayed in the happy student who enjoys going to school and the

Special Needs child who has the opportunity to mix with other children. In a healthcare setting it may be the satisfied patient who had a positive experience as an inpatient in a hospital. In the 20% weighting applied to leadership there may be a suggestion of a distributed approach, giving people (teachers and parents) a 9% weighting. The framework indicates that leadership is a key enabler which helps to achieve results for the organisation and these results feedback to innovation and learning.

In answering the question - is leadership critical to driving organisational effectiveness – I suggest that it is key to this achievement. However, it is how the leader leads in the context of the setting which is key. In other words it is not possible to take a set of general critical success factors for a primary school or healthcare setting and apply these in isolation. The values, philosophy and ethos of the setting must be to the fore in the measurement of organisational effectiveness. Using the metaphor of the iceberg where the values and philosophy in the culture of an organisation are below the water level indicates that these outcomes may prove the most difficult to measure. In exploring the leader's impact on organisational effectiveness a research approach, such as a case study may give some insight into these outcomes if it is approached with an open mind. A case study methodology may illuminate a new way of recognising the links between leadership and organisational effectiveness in healthcare. In addition, drawing on examples from a different setting, such as education, may encourage new perspectives on these explorations. Finally different ways of seeing may provide us with new ways of knowing, freeing our minds of traditional mind-sets and assumptions.

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