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David B. Ross

*Nova Southeastern University*, [daviross@nova.edu](mailto:daviross@nova.edu)

V. C. Bryan

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# What do teachers think about school leadership?

**VALERIE BRYAN and DAVID ROSS** report on a study that looked at teachers' perceptions of the leadership style of their school principal, in relation to their own sense of professional empowerment.

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate school teachers' perceptions of leadership styles that are currently used by secondary school principals in relations to the works of Bolman and Deal. The fourth largest school district located in southeast Florida, and ninth largest in the nation, was used as the site for this study. This study found that the dominant leadership frame was human resource among secondary school principals, as well as possessing the other three orientation frames, according to Bolman and Deal's Four Frames of Leadership. Data showed that there were some significant differences based on some of the independent variables. The more significant finding may be that the teachers perceived their principals to be more effective as managers than as leaders. Literature sources indicate that the management role is designed to support the current practices and policies of the status quo administration. Since today's educational climate is so tumultuous, it may be essential that we have less of the status quo. Teachers, as other professionals, want to be led, and not just to be managed, by persons of vision who can act as change agents and not merely as keepers of the status quo.

**THE** challenge of developing leaders is not new; nor is it unique to modern organisations outside the educational arena. If an administrator is to be an effective leader in the world of business, he or she must organise and integrate clear and understandable business-related concepts so employees can succeed in today's competitive business environment (Krause, 1997).

Similar to the business environment, it is important for principals to understand the human side of education and how to motivate and influence their employees.

Successful administrators in both business and education must maximise their employees' creativity and commitment to organisational goals, and invest in, and utilise, their talents because employees are the organisation's most vital resource. However, to accomplish this task, administrators need to know what leadership style and level of influence are appropriate to use in their specific settings and be able to influence and convince employees to perform specific tasks (Dawson, 1992).

## Leadership and school effectiveness

Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan and Lee's (1982) research on school effectiveness shows that school principals' leadership is pertinent to the effectiveness of the school, but that no one style of leadership is appropriate for every school, in every situation. In other words, principals should use multiple leadership styles that are flexible and pertinent to the crises at hand.

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Bolman and Deal (1991) developed the Four Framework Approach leadership model that suggests leaders display leadership behaviors in one of four types of frameworks: structural, human resource, political or symbolic. In their model, the style can either be effective or ineffective, depending on the chosen behaviors and the select situations. Bolman and Deal's claim that '*managers often use only one or two frames, but need to rely on all four to be fully effective as managers and leaders*'. Thompson (2000), in a study of administrators of a multinational corporation, suggested that all four Bolman and Deal frames were associated with effectiveness, and that using multiple frames is crucial to one's effectiveness as a manager and a leader.

Other authors support the views of Bolman and Deal regarding using different tools for situations. Lashway

(2000) speaks of using several leadership styles; however, he feels that facilitative leadership can create an environment for student achievement, one of the significant areas of accountability in schools today. Lashway suggests that the principal mobilise his or her teachers and students by using the appropriate leadership style to share his or her authority in order to address issues related to standardised measures of school accountability.

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Several authors feel that new principals should be change agents who can deal with a multitude of issues, share authority and build consensus in their own schools (Razik & Swanson, 2001). Kimbrough and Burkett (1990) support this finding: '*Strong principals promote a collaboration of effort among the teachers in their schools*'. Meaningful change cannot take place without effective, informed teachers working in a collaborative environment with both the time and funds to reach their potential.

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2003) feel that for principals and teachers to collaborate and communicate, both top-bottom and bottom-top strategies must integrate with one another. It is both the principal and teacher working together as change agents who will steer the school in a purposeful direction. They cite the ever-increasing teacher and principal turnover rate as a signal of a new era requiring innovative ideas and thinking to help teachers, students and parents. The phrase, 'substitute for leadership', refers to a leader who gives his or her teachers the authority to apply their unique knowledge, skills and abilities to the decision-making and own the experience (Sergiovanni, 1992).

### **Professional whole-school collaboration**

Routman (1999) reports on Shields and Knapp that school reform is most successful when the staff acts in a professional manner to collaborate on improvement of the entire school. Successful reform depends on competent, knowledgeable, and courageous teachers. It is the role of the principal to challenge his or her teachers to be part of the reform and change. If meaningful change is to occur, students, parents, teachers, and school principals need to be heard and respected throughout the process. The conversations around curriculum push the change. Instructional leadership places the principal at the pinnacle of learning, as well as in the role of a facilitator for corroborating a shared

leadership endeavor (Ubben, Hughes & Norris, 2003) and empowering teachers.

This 'leadership for change' is an important tool for effective school reform and it affects all involved. While it is true that the principal is the driving force toward school reform, he or she cannot do it alone. '*The evidence supports the assertion that a substantive change initiative must be supported by teachers*' (Marzano, 2003).

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the select school district's secondary school teachers' perceptions of leadership styles that are currently used by secondary school principals in relation to the works of Bolman and Deal. The fourth largest school district located in south-east Florida and ninth largest in the United States was used for the site for this study. The following research questions were:

- What is the dominant leadership orientation frame of secondary principals in the select school district, as perceived by their secondary teachers?
- Are there perceptual differences within the independent variables of the secondary school teachers, considering age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, area of teaching discipline, and years of experience, regarding the leadership orientation frames used by their principals within the select school district?
- Are there significant differences by the secondary school teachers within the select school district concerning perceptions of their principals' overall effectiveness as managers or perception of their principals' overall effectiveness as leaders.

Based on the work of Bolman and Deal (1990), this research study anticipated a leadership concept that consisted of four cognitive leadership orientations (for example, structural, human resource, political, and symbolic), with each presenting a different analysis of an organisation.

The human resource orientation deals with being supportive and participative; the structural orientation deals with analytical and organisational skills; the political orientation derives strength on power and political sensitivity; and the symbolic orientation is based on inspiration and charisma. Bolman and Deal (1990) speculated that individuals possess a dominant leadership orientation, and are able to use their dominant leadership orientation and their knowledge to make improved decisions about intricate managerial situations.

## Sampling plan

The school district possessed the following characteristics: (a) it was composed of schools of elementary, middle, high, magnet, alternative education, charter, and community; (b) it had 172,000 plus students; (c) it had classes ranging from kindergarten to grade twelve; (d) it contained urban, suburban, and rural schools; and (e) it served student populations of economically poor, middle class, and wealthy.

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### Meaningful change cannot take place without effective, informed teachers working in a collaborative environment with both the time and funds to reach their potential.

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Between August 2004 and June 2005, data was collected from 349 (35.8%) of the secondary teachers of 13 secondary schools, using the Leadership Orientations (Other) Survey by Bolman and Deal as a means to assess the perceptions. Based on the work of Chen (2004), Bolman and Deal's Leadership Orientation Other (LO) survey was viewed as, *'appropriate for empirical research on investigating the degree to which a principal was perceived by teachers as his or her leadership style fits into the four frames'*.

## Findings

According to the statistical data, the dominant leadership frame (of Bolman and Deal's Four Framework Approach) among secondary school principals, as perceived by the teachers, was the human resource frame. These findings are consistent with the research of several authors (Eckley, 1997, Davis, 1996, Suzuki, 1994, & Durocher, 1995). Another study by Bolman and Deal (1992) viewed similarities and differences between principals in Broward County, Florida, another rapidly growing USA district, and Singapore. The survey revealed that, in both Florida and Singapore, the human resource frame was dominant and the second most common frame was the structural frame.

The human resource framework in Bolman and Deal views people as the heart of the organisation. In this frame, to find a common ground, principals and teachers must have an individual view of their careers and must embrace instructional leadership (Ubben, Hughes & Norris, 2003). Principals can maximise teachers' po-

tential by recognising that they are individuals and not an 'insignificant' part of an institution. Doing this helps to motivate and encourage them in their attempts to become effective teachers. In this frame, recognition, achievement and growth are very important for teachers to become motivated (Owens, 1998; Ubben, Hughes & Norris, 2003). Principals can give teachers authority and the capability to influence the goals and direction of their school. In this environment, the teacher who is empowered has a full investment in their careers, school, and all stakeholders.

Bolman and Deal supported the idea that people and their relationship within the school environment are significant to the accomplishment of the organisation.

*'The better a principal understands teachers' expectations, the more likely a principal can fulfill the expectations of the role. Valid and reliable data on teacher expectations will assist principals to understand more thoroughly how those expectations can influence teacher behavior, which, ultimately, affects student achievement.'*

(Richardson, Lane, & Flanigan, 1996).

In this particular study, neither men nor women perceived differences in the leadership frames of the effectiveness of their principals. In some cases, these differences were viewed from the perspective of the principals themselves and, in other cases, by the perspectives of others viewing them. Thompson (2000) stated that in Bolman and Deal's four-frame leadership theory and Quinn's competing values model that male and female educational leaders were equally effective in their particular organisations, in spite of the stereotypical implications stated in previous research. Gilson (1994), researching Missouri's higher education administrators using the four frames of leadership, showed no differences with respect to gender, as did other dissertations (Eckley, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Taylor, 2002; & Pounders, 1997).

There was no significant difference in perception of leadership of the principals by secondary teachers of various age groups. Based upon the data, this researcher cannot provide in-depth elaboration with confidence, but can suggest a possible reason may include that the teachers of all age groups have the same viewpoint because they are following a basic rubric for state and districts standards that they have been schooled in. A teacher or administrator must follow certain rules, policies and procedures regulated by the school district that employs them. However, in Eckley (1997), gender, age and education level were found to have no significance in teacher empowerment from their school administrators. Of these groups, significance

was shown that the Caucasians had higher means in the political frame. The 'other' respondents had a higher mean than Caucasians in the symbolic frame. There was not enough data to support the results from the other non-Caucasian respondents and too few cases of non-Caucasian respondents to analyse separately. Results from an ANOVA regarding the independent variable of areas of teaching discipline showed significance in the symbolic frame. Although there was an overall difference when an ANOVA was checked, there was no significant difference after a post hoc analysis. There may be more differences individually rather than in the group overall. It is an observation that all teachers are doing the same task: educating the student population based on the state and district curriculum, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, and following the standardised guidelines.

When a post hoc analysis was conducted, there was no difference in the groups except in groups of 21-25 years of teaching and 1-5 years of teaching experience. The data showed that the group with 21-25 years of experience had scored a higher mean in the subscales of supportive and inspirational. A new teacher with less than five years experience may not have the expertise to fully comprehend all the responsibilities that apply to the teaching profession. As a teacher increases in years of experience, so does his or her ability to participate more fully in the school culture. Teachers with 21 to 25 years of experience have worked longer in the district, have a more defined working relationship with their principal, feel more connected to their principal and the school's mission, and generally have a higher confidence in their own ability to be an effective teacher. The teachers in the one to five years of teaching group are learning the system and how to meet all the daily demands of the system.

## Perceptions of young teachers

This constant crisis mode pushes many young teachers into viewing their positions as overwhelming and hence they may view their administrators as non-supportive and non-inspiring. A definitive need exists as a result of this study to provide a different support structure to nurture the new teachers and the veteran teachers, to enhance schools effectiveness for the learners being served. The data revealed that the respondents view their principals more as a manager than as a leader. Literature supports that principals have had little or no effect on school conditions in other conventional urban districts (Drake & Roe, 2003). The research findings in this particular sample of teachers suggest that the principals were selected to carry out and manage the day-to-day operations of the schools. The teachers do not appear to be view their principals as change agents

or persons of vision. 'Such principals serve only as supporters of the central system, rather than as leaders, and thus their schools approach homeostasis'. The typical bureaucratic model immediately comes into focus, where principals act exclusively on the basis of written rules and regulations, able to handle the increase in student population and demographics in the surrounding communities, and the constant day-to-day operations of managing their school site.

Teachers who are new to the profession did have significantly different views of their leaders than the seasoned teachers. The more seasoned teachers appeared to view their leaders as more supportive and more inspirational, suggesting that seasoned teachers may feel more empowered. With a rate of attrition of teachers in the profession, it is important that all teachers feel empowered, regardless of their years of experience.

## Conclusion

With the high rate of attrition from the teaching profession, every avenue needs to be explored to retain the less experienced. The feeling of empowerment by their principal may assist in this process. Today's educational climate needs to continue research on what could encourage the teachers of tomorrow to stay in the profession.

Fenwick and Pierce (2001) believe an urban principal has many responsibilities, such as relations with staff, parents, and community, recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers, staff development and evaluation, budgeting, as well as developing curricula to address multicultural, inclusion and behavior issues. Regardless of the role of the principal, teachers of different disciplines may perceive the need for the principal to be adept at a host of leadership skills.

*\* A detailed list of references is available from the authors.*

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Dr Valerie C. Bryan is Professor in Educational Leadership in Adult Education, at Florida Atlantic University, USA. See: [www.adulteducation.fau.edu/bryan/resume.htm](http://www.adulteducation.fau.edu/bryan/resume.htm) for further information. Professor Bryan can be contacted by email at: [bryan@fau.edu](mailto:bryan@fau.edu).*

*Dr David B. Ross is currently Lead Faculty/ Program Professor for the Doctoral Minor in Charter School Education and Leadership at Nova Southeastern University – Fischler School of Education and Human Services, in the USA. He can be contacted by email at: [daviross@nova.edu](mailto:daviross@nova.edu).*

