The Psychodynamic Approach in Distributed Leadership:
Building a Common Language among Graduate Cohort Students

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Abstract

The purpose of my proposed research study is to examine the impact of the heighten awareness of college students' personality strengths and potential limiters on their behaviors within distributed leadership while working collaboratively in a cohort setting. Through common themes of the cohort, this mixed method study will use an autoethnography approach with a combination of the results from a communication tool to determine if the relationships between the two dominant personality colors of each participant is connected to their behaviors.

(Key terms: autoethnography, cohort, distributed leadership, educational leadership, personality, psychodynamic approach)

Introduction

Shared leadership at its very best is contributed by demonstrating ways of how all leaders in an organization can work collaboratively during decision making. (Ulhoi, 2014; Carson, 2007) Several factors are attributed to how leaders in organizations are able to practice shared leadership through activities that help build long lasting relationships and effective interactions amongst all stakeholders. By modeling this leadership practice, individuals who hold leadership roles are able to successfully carry out duties as assigned during the absence of the organization's leader. Hence, that the leader has modeled those effective practices that contribute to the climate and culture of the environment, the roles that formal and informal leaders play can single-handedly change the outcome of organizational improvement.

In distributed leadership, it is greatly noted that the duties of leadership are distributed amongst all leaders in the organization. Leaders seek those potential and upcoming leaders in the classroom or support staff to take on responsibilities as if they could possibly take on these role in the future in an educational leadership capacity. The leader empowers these individuals with assignments that are clarified with goals in mind; those individuals are then able to move forward with best practices modeled from the leader. Educational leaders in higher education must understand that the relationship between both leaders and professional staff is important when reaching the mission of the college and/or university's standards. (Bolden, 2000; Shakir, 2011)

Distributed leadership is a construct that describes the strategies of a distinct type of leadership currently emerging in scholarship and practice. (Maxwell, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2009) From the early works of Gibb (1954) mentioned by numerous researchers on this topic such as Peter Gronn (2002), distributed leadership has faced the upcoming realities of how educational leaders are able to authorize shared responsibilities in order to empower formal leaders in the organization and the outcome of the performance. "Gibbs distinction between two forms of distribution: the overall numerical frequency of the acts contributed by each group member and the multiplicity or pattern of group functions performed" (Gronn, 2002, p. 324) form the basis for Gronn's distinction between numerical and concertive action and provide the fundamental building blocks for subsequent theoretical development." (Bolden, 2011, pgs. 252-253) "Leadership in organizational work teams has become one of the most popular and rapidly growing areas of leadership theory and research." (Northouse, 2013, pg. 287) Surprisingly, distributed

leadership has been defined in a variety of ways by those same researchers who were able to provide robust information on its contribution to the area of educational leadership.

Distributed or shared leadership (Carson, et al., 2007; Ulhoi & Muller, 2014) is heavily weighed on the performance outcome of a team of leaders and not based solely on one individual leader. Within educational leadership, all leaders have relevant and significant levels of expertise and it is imperative that organizations use this type of leadership to produce greater and multiple opportunities to lead. "Distributed leadership is a theory that helps us understand leadership practice, and therefore the interactions between leaders, followers, and elements of the situation." (Sherer, 2008, pg. 17) It is important that formal and informal leaders (Camburn, et al., 2003; Grenda, 2011; Heikka, et al., 2012) have a greater understanding of their role in the decision-making process within their organization. This active role can consist of working with individuals who have different levels of expertise, as well as different leadership personalities. Graduate students who serve in educational leadership capacities or who may become future educational leaders must understand and harness their strengths and limiters when communicating with leaders like themselves. Gronn (2002) "described distributed leadership as a new architecture for leadership in which activity bridges agency (the traits/behaviours of individual leaders) and structure (the systemic properties and role structures in concertive action." (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012, pg. 70) Within distributed leadership, leader-participants experience breakdown in communication if they fail to understand the respective individual personality characteristics and traits.

Problem Statement

A basic problem in the area of distributed leadership stems from how different individuals who possess different characteristics, such as personalities, work

collaboratively with others in their organization for a common goal. Based on the article from authors Carson, Tesluk and Marrone, (2007), one of the limitations and future research of shared [distributed] leadership includes the following:

> *"Potential mediating mechanisms linking shared leadership to performance and other effectiveness criteria should be explored as well. For instance, the reciprocal interactions and influences and influential exchanges between team members may facilitate development of team knowledge structures such as transactive memory systems or shared mental models."* (pg. 1229)

This limitation sets the tone for empirical research on how leaders must have a heighten awareness of their own personalities, as well as others, in order for distributed leadership to positively take its course in the area of educational leadership.

Purpose of Study

Within the context of the psychodynamic approach (Northouse, 2013), the purpose of my proposed research study is to examine the impact of the heighten awareness of college students' personality strengths and potential limiters on their behaviors within distributed leadership. "In the psychodynamic approach, personality types are emphasized and evidence is presented that suggests that various personality types are better suited to particular leadership positions or situations." (Northouse, 2013, p. 319). The psychodynamic approach emphasizes that leaders are aware of their personalities and the personalities of others.

This proposed research study will also determine how college students build a common language by using a communication tool (Equilibria, 2011) when

communicating, responding and interacting with each other in a cohort. An analysis of the implementation of this communication tool will reveal how a group of college students are able to practice "spontaneous collaboration through intuitive working relations and institutionalized practices" (Gronn, 2002, pp. 446-447) by having a heighten self-awareness of their personality strengths and potential limiters as well as those around them.

Significance of the Study

With this proposed research study, educational leaders will understand the many facets of distributed leadership in which the distribution of activities and assignments are given to individuals who serve in different areas of leadership within their organization and possess essential "knowledge and skills to perform these roles." (Northouse:a, 2013, Levi, 2011) More importantly, educational leaders will have a heighten awareness of their strengths and potential limiters, as well as their followers, when distributed leadership is practiced. By measuring this type of behavior during collaborative projects or activities, educational leaders will be able to understand how to interact and respond to others who contribute their essential knowledge and skills in their leadership area of expertise. "To be an effective leader, one needs to respond with the action that is required of the situation." (Northouse, 2013) With the shared responsibility of getting the desired results, their interaction, responses and communication during this time will be pertinent to the outcome.

Utilizing a communication tool allows an organization to build a common language within their environment, add value in how stakeholders communicate and respond to needs, helps build and strengthen relationships, and transforms the perceptions

of how the educational leader and its followers interact and collaborate with each other in different situations. The tool helps to identify different personality styles which enable individuals to better understand themselves and those around them. This leads to having a heighten awareness that we do not all think and act the same and that we all have different communication styles and behavioral tendencies which are often largely linked to our personality. (Equilibria, 2013) With distributed leadership, the leader must "work and communicate effectively with everyone – both inside and outside the school." (Wilmore, 2003, pg. 35)

Study Limitations

1. The psychodynamic approach to distributed leadership may impact the behaviors of cohort graduate students.

2. The role of the researcher will be the participant observer. This role is due to the experience of working with the survey, as well as a graduate student in the cohort.

Literature Review

Psychodynamic Approach

In the literature provided by Northouse (2013), he provides a glimpse of the psychodynamic approach in its beginning with Sigmund Freud. (pg. 321) Freud began his studies with this approach in the realms of psychoanalysis when used with his patients. The literature describes how Freud uses psychoanalysis to get his patients to talk to him in an authentic matter, instead of using other approaches such as hypnosis. With psychoanalysis, Freud was able to understand why his patients had certain behaviors based on their experiences or the traits they possessed. In order to understand them better, he used what the literature describes as "talking therapies." Talking therapies embed how Freud would interact with his patients and understand them just by simply talking to them. With this action, he developed what is known as the psychodynamic approach. The approach is defined as "personality types that are emphasized and evidence is presented that suggests that various personality types are better suited to particular leadership positions or situations." (Northouse, 2013)

In educational leadership, it is important that leaders are able to understand their leadership capabilities, such as strengths and potential limiters, as well as those of their followers or individuals that they interact with. It gives leaders an opportunity to take ownership in knowing themselves, understand why they think act, or behave the way that they do in certain situations, and better able to understand and interact with individuals who do not think, act or behave the way that they do.

Distributed Leadership

A review of the literature of distributed leadership indicates that the "first reference to the term distributed leadership was made in 1954 by Gibb in the *Handbook of Social Psychology.*" (Edwards, 2011, pg. 302) The definition of distributed leadership comes in variety of aspects along the broad spectrum of theorists in this area. "Distributed leadership involves the sharing of influence by team members who step forward when situations warrant providing the leadership necessary and then stepping back to allow others to lead." (Northouse, 2013, pg. 289) For this study, distributed leadership will be defined as *a shared authority of activities and projects held by individuals who are in leadership roles in an organization to receive a desired result of outcome.* One leader cannot be solely responsible for communicating or carrying out decisions that are important for the organization; the leader must be able to seek and trust the thoughts and ideas of potential formal and informal leaders in the organization. "Distributed leadership offers a framework which encourages the active participation and partnering of experts and enthusiasts and the networks and communities of practices that are built to achieve organizational change." (Jones, et al., 2012, pg. 69) Working and collaborating with individuals who embed different characteristics and traits can overwhelmingly impact the outcome of desired results. In this case, distributed leadership is relevant to the positive performance of the internal team.

Leadership influences are notable throughout any organization because leaders are responsible for providing clarity of the organization's vision. The presence of distributed leadership in organizations using multiple opportunities to practice this theory can be helpful. It puts at the forefront that strategic goals can be successful if all participants can actively work through their current challenges and barriers. As stated by

Northouse (2013), "future research needs to focus more on the distributed or shared leadership within team." (p. 289)

In distributed leadership (Timperly, 2015; Shakir, 2011), it is noted that the duties of leadership are distributed amongst all leaders in the organization (Presthus, 2006). Based on those findings, *the aim is to bring into focus some aspects of leadership that typically remain obscured…"* (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008, pg. 373) Research-based studies (Heikka, 2012; Jones, 2012; Sherer, 2008) indicate how the distributed leadership theory plays a pivotal role in school-based leadership. These studies lead to the discussion of how educational leaders use this theory in practice across different education sectors, mainly beginning with the earlier stages of education in a school setting. The literature also provides information that takes a closer look between examining the connection between educational leaders and their behaviors when working with others. Distributed leadership must be embraced as the type of leadership that allows all individuals in an organization to become leaders at some time during their duties as assigned (Maxwell, 2009; Presthus, 2006; Jones, 2012). What distributed leadership does is broaden this spectrum of shared authority and places the heighten awareness of the leaders' strengths and potential limiters into the limelight.

Communication Tools

From a cultural perspective, the communication and interaction between educational leaders and their followers (Kuo, 2009; Halawah, 2003) is a pivotal part of building a strong relationship for organizational improvement. Professionally, dialogues between organizational leaders and their followers must be clear, consistent, and based on non-interpretations of the delivered message. Although educational leaders possess different personalities, it is imperative that they [educational leaders] do not perceive

these messages as negative, but use them as a starting point to understanding their followers.

Effective communication between the deliverer (educational leader) and the receiver (follower) takes place when messages must be conveyed for informational purposes, whether it's formal or informal. "Differential relationships highlight the diverse perspectives and experiences reflected by the academic staff and administrators, resonating separately with different discourse communities in one large organization." (Kuo, pg. 49, 2009) What tends to happen is how that message is delivered and received upon the interactions between both parties; this plays an intricate part in conveying that message. As stated in the article from Rafferty (2003, pg. 50):

> "*…to examine upward communication, it is important to have some degree of appreciation for the paradox that organizations present: that "people create, maintain, and control organizations, yet organizations attain a life of their own and often overshadow, constrain, and manipulate their members" (Poole & McPhee, 1983, p.195).*

Researchers have created tools to assist with understanding how individuals in organizations react and respond in variety of situations that may impact the relationship between others. If individuals work in an environment in which they are able to understand an individual's strengths and limiters, organizational leaders will be able to understand the importance of how to interact with individuals who may or may not share the same leadership characteristics or traits. This interaction helps educational leaders and their followers come to a greater understanding of how and why people interact and communicate the way that they do. However, this does not excuse their behaviors or

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work patterns, but its importance lies in the awareness of the strengths and limiters that can become reactive or proactive in any given situation. When it comes to educational leadership, management and administration, the variables spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practices (Gronn, 2002) work in sequence to form relationships that will help the organization to build stronger bonds between all stakeholders. As it pertains to human relations by Gillies (2013), "the positive reporting of one's managerial performance through (self) evaluations, reports, development plan audits, and various other forms of communication is designed to present the leader and manager in such a way as to preserve and strengthen their continued professional existence." (pg. 260) The school leader must be able to develop strategic ways to effectively communicate messages with all stakeholders to ensure clarity of the message and to ensure that everyone understand the organization's vision, which plays an important part in the communication process. "Good communication does not happen by accident." (Harris, pg. 19, 2004) This is such that implementing a tool that addresses how all stakeholders are aware of their strengths and limiters can be the initial start of understanding how to effectively communicate with each other. "Knowing one's strengths and potential limiters can help people express themselves in a way that will earn respect without alienating and hurting other people." (Equilibria Services, Ltd., pg. 21, 2013)

The focus of this proposed research study is how the psychodynamics approach in distributed leadership is used when a tool is introduced to a cohort of educational leaders. Using a communication tool, which defines the strengths and potential limiters of each individual leader, may help each individual have a self-awareness based on the outcome

of a collaborative project. In addition, the educational leader will also have a heighten

awareness of their counterparts' strengths and potential limiters, enabling them to interact

and respond accordingly. These strengths and potential limiters describe certain

characteristics and traits that the leader possesses. Leadership characteristics and traits

play an integral role in the relationship of the leader. Certain traits and characteristics

may identify what leaders look like and how that leader reacts to situations in their

organization. In addition, the major leadership traits are central to what others perceive

and believe the leader possesses. Leaders possess certain strengths and potential limiters

that determine their responses, reactions, and interactions with other team members in the

organization.

The Study

This mixed method study will use an autoethnography approach to provide a greater understanding of the personality strengths and potential limiters of each graduate student during the group activity. (Roberts, 2010) "Ethnographies focus on developing a complex, complete description of the culture of a group, a culture-sharing group. The ethnography may be of the entire group or a subset of a group." (Creswell, 2013, P. 91) This research study will allow the researcher to "build a complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting." (Creswell, 2013, p. 300) The results from this proposed research study will help the intended audience to understand how implementing a communication tool that reveals how groups of educational leaders are able practice spontaneous collaboration, institutionalized practices through intuitive working relations (Gronn, 2002) by having a heighten awareness of one's personality strengths and potential limiters.

Research Questions

The reasons warranted for the research questions is to understand how educational leaders serving in both formal and informal leadership roles in a graduate cohort setting develop a common language in which they are able to interact, respond and communicate effectively in different situations for a common goal. The proposed research study is guided by the following broad research question: If graduate students who are in educational leadership capacities have a heighten awareness of their individual strengths and potential limiters and the strengths and potential limiters of others, does this impact the role of distributed leadership when building a common language for a common goal? Three ancillary questions for the research study include the following:

1.   What strengths and potential limiters exist or co-existed before the implementation of activities and assignments?

2.   How does educational leaders' strengths and potential limiters impact educational discourse in distributed leadership?

3.   How does the common language used by educational leaders during the activity influence distributed leadership?

To pursue these questions, an observation of the graduate students' personality strengths and potential limiters will be conducted on its impact of team learning in distributed leadership. As it pertains to the psychodynamic approach (Northouse, 2013), educational leaders should understand how effective communication and interactive concepts play an active role in spontaneous collaboration, institutionalized practices, and intuitive working relations (Gronn, 2002) within different situations of distributed leadership. This action focuses on graduate students' self-perception of self-efficacy rather than objectivity.

Sample Selection

The target sample size of this research will be 15 cohort participants, consistent of both male and female graduate students enrolled in a HBCU educational leadership doctoral program. Outside of the cohort, these participants play significant leadership roles on their jobs such as campus leaders, administrative/executive leaders, support staff, etc. in which they communicate, respond and interact daily with all stakeholders in the organization. The sample selection is convenient, as the students are enrolled in doctoral courses at the university and participate in a cohort.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this proposed research study will consist of both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data for this study, primarily E-Colors, will be identified using the E-Colors PDI (personality diversity indicator). All participants will take the E-Colors PDI (2011) survey and receive the results on their strengths and potential limiters. Although each participant encompasses all four E-Colors (red, blue, yellow and green), the participants' two dominant E-Colors will be the focus of this proposed research study. Each color, in no significant order, red (doer), blue (relater), yellow (socializer) and green (thinker), are descriptors of how each participant proceeds in their daily routine. The other quantitative data will be the demographic information (gender, age and occupation). This quantitative data will be collected during the focus group interviews. The qualitative data collected will consist of the observations and notes gathered during the activity and the questions asked during the focus group.

The data collected will be placed in a SPSS spreadsheet and the test will be cross tabulation. The analysis of data will be conducted using common themes from the group on the relationship between the two dominant E-Colors of each participant and their observed behaviors.

Summary

The psychodynamic approach in distributed leadership contributes greatly to effective communication and relationships. This relation brings forth how individual attributes or characteristics account for the educational leadership style that is present in the organization. "If leadership is exercised, then the hypothetical development programme would be about learning and practising those behaviours and skills deemed to provide leadership." (Gillies, 2013, pgs. 155-156) That program, or tool for that 'matter,

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should be helpful in interpreting those behaviors and to seek how to respond and interact in a proactive way.   As stated in the tool's mission: *"E-Colors creates a culture that empowers students and staff to become transformational leaders"* (Equilibria Services, Ltd., 2013) by embracing all personalities through effective communication. "School climate is organizational climate with context specificity. It embraces the milieu of personalities, the principal and teachers, interacting within the sociological and psychological framework present in all schools." (Rafferty, 2003, pg. 52) It is important that communication be ongoing, but more importantly, communication should be conveyed and understood in such a way that leaves the receiver with clarity, and supports, and justifies, the deliverer with satisfaction that the message was proactively conveyed. "In turn, those insights can result in better communication and more effective decision making and problem solving." (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, pg., 92)

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