

Managing Disruptive Change through Leadership in Schools



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ABSTRACT: Prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic, school heads used to operate within known boundaries, with clear parameters, with set duty rosters, with clear lines of accountability and rules governing most things. Bureaucracy and by implication managerial leadership was the preferred approach to leading and managing. However, the context in which this approach was preferred has changed significantly because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools are now operating within prescribed Covid-19 guidelines. A raft of new measures such as physical distancing, wearing of face masks, hand washing, use of sanitisers and other public health protocols are now part of the new practices to reduce the spread of the disease.

The new 'normal' in school leadership has proved more difficult than the preCovid-19 one. It is a completely new ball game altogether, with no precedent or blueprint to learn from and yet school heads have to thrive in this unfamiliar territory. The problem is that they are now operating in an unfamiliar context, with new unfamiliar roles. This paper draws attention to the leadership practices that school heads can use to manage this disruptive change brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws on lessons from experiences from elsewhere in the world to provide leadership practices that school heads can use.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Complexity theory, Systems theory, School, Covid-19

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic (WHO, 2020), school heads used to operate within known boundaries, with clear parameters to a school year, with set terms and holidays, with clear lines of accountability and rules governing most things including examinations (Harris & Jones, 2020). Their roles were clear. Bureaucracy and by implication managerial leadership was the preferred approach to leading and managing (Bush, 2007; 2008). However, the context in which this approach was preferred has changed significantly because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has caused many disruptions in schools, which are unprecedented (Netolicky, 2020). These include but are not limited to the closure of schools (UNICEF, 2020) and shifting to online learning (Sahlberg, 2020). A raft of new measures such as physical distancing, wearing of face masks, hand washing, use of sanitisers and other public health protocols has preceded the reopening of schools in Zimbabwe, as part of the new practices to reduce the spread of the disease in schools has preceded the reopening of schools in Zimbabwe, (UNICEF, 2020). Schools are increasingly relying on teacher leadership and technology to support instruction and professional learning communities (Bolden, 2020).

Weber (2020) raises quite a number of questions that serve to portray the complexity of the new environment. He questions whether learners, particularly young ones, can stay six feet away from everyone else during the entire school day. Can they spend the duration of the day wearing masks? Do the schools have room to accommodate social distancing of their student population for the duration of the school day? Like every other workforce, school staff also has many people who have preconditions that make them susceptible to becoming critically ill when exposed to Covid-19. This shift in the school context is unlikely to return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all (Mayanja, 2020). The issues raised by Weber (2020) point to the increased demands placed on school heads which according to Bush (2008) emanate from accountability pressures and higher expectations. The new 'normal' in schools has proved more difficult than the preCovid-19 one (Netolicky, 2020). It is a completely new ball game altogether, with no precedent or blueprint to learn from and yet school heads must thrive in this unfamiliar territory (Harris and Jones, 2020). The problem is that they are now operating in an unfamiliar context, with new unfamiliar roles. This paper draws attention to the leadership practices that school heads can use in schools in times of Covid-19. It seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights on the leadership practices that suit the Covid-19 context in schools.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework guiding this paper is the Complexity Leadership theory. Complexity Leadership theory allows for individuals to understand how successful organisations thrive in turbulent times (Towler, 2020). It derives its theoretical foundations from the systems theory (ibid, 2020) hence its emphasis on the whole system of an organisation, including its social interactions and ways how to manage complexity. This means that it exudes systems thinking (Senge, 2006) which allows for situations in

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organisations to be viewed from a broad view. It is therefore a systems theory focused on adaptive outcomes with a focus on context (Witkins, 2017). This implies that everyone in the system can make decisions after carefully considering their impact on the rest of the system.

Because it is a systems theory, leadership is threaded throughout the system (Hunter, 2012) and plays an important role whenever an event takes place and people react and adapt to it (Towler, 2020). It therefore provides a system view to leadership – a complete deviation from traditional leadership theories that focus on the heroics of a single leader (Bush, 2008). This suggests that it advocates for leadership at every level of the system. This implies that leaders at each level of the system act to influence the system and its outcomes. They have to work together to provide each other with direction and purpose so that the system is able to adapt to and respond to change. This explains why the theory places a lot of emphasis on the importance of social interactions within organisations. School heads are therefore an interdependent and interconnected part of the collective called a school (Netolicky, 2020). The complexity leadership theory is applicable in organisational settings to understand how effective organisations can gain a competitive advantage through leadership, strategy and direction (Towler, 2021). Organisational members interact collaboratively as they change, create innovation and develop with a focus on complex relationships and interaction rather than controlling, standardising and autocracy (Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009).

Several scholars agree that complexity leadership theory is a form of shared leadership in which leadership position is not concentrated in one person but shared among many (Towler, 2020). Anyone can therefore become a leader through his or her networks of relationships. Unlike the hierarchical structure in schools, where resistance to change is by obstructing the flow of information and opportunities for exchanging ideas (Siemens, Dawson and Eshleman, 2018), complexity leadership theory illustrates that the focus is on many and constantly recurring social interactions within a network. This is evident in a study by Hanson and Ford (2010), who found that the core leaders in a hospital laboratory setting were not the formal director or administrators. Rather, they were workers on the front line such as customer service representatives. The study showed that the customer service core played an important role in conducting information flow to all others in the lab and had heavy influence among other lab sections. Many advantages derive from a networked institution (Siemens, Dawson and Eshleman, 2018). They suggest that information flow is rapid. Actors in the institution have an increased degree of autonomy. There is openness and democratic engagement with all in the institution. This principle is therefore quite relevant in the Covid-19 context in schools.

Leaders in organisations should therefore network with the rest of the organisational members to exchange information and knowledge to improve outcomes. The following examples illustrate how this principle works. An urban church that had been declining for 50 years resisted every change effort from its leaders. However, a small idea that emerged from interactions among its members and amplified into something radical led the church to an identity change and internal renewal. This example demonstrates how the principle of emergence enables the creation of transformational environments as a way to foster conditions to adapt to change rather than relying on one specific leader to constantly react to and respond to change. This is where the concept of distributed leadership or shared leadership comes in handy particularly when it comes to the Covid-19 context in schools.

To foster opportunities for emergence among stakeholders in schools during Covid-19 times, school heads face the need to enable self-organization. Self-organization involves the processes whereby teachers during Covid-19 times begin to organise and achieve tasks or activities. Self-organisation thus entails distributing leadership responsibilities to teachers to improve the quality of the decisions made in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic requires a coordinated response that involves all stakeholders and not the heroics of a single leader. Self-organisation was evident in Haiti following the 2014 earthquake. Over 450 volunteers from the Open map community solved a complex challenge by collectively mapping roads within Haiti using newly released satellite images. This resulted in the most detailed map of Haiti in existence to date. Thus, by allowing for collaboration and shared responsibilities within schools during Covid-19 times, school heads inculcate self-organisation and social coordination that are part of leadership best practices.

MANAGING DISRUPTIVE CHANGE THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Literature review in this paper focuses on managing disruptive change through leadership in times of Covid-19 as shared by various researchers and thought leaders. Sherwood (2020) emphasises the importance of communication during the Covid-19 pandemic and suggests that school leaders ought to communicate with calm, purpose and positivity with stakeholders. This entails that school leaders gauge the needs, wants and expectations of those they lead to create trust among them. Without mutual trust, there cannot be any transformative change (Fernandez and Shaw, 2021). They also suggest that stakeholder preferences be of consideration when choosing communication channels. This is because various stakeholders in the schools utilise different communication channels. For example, teachers may prefer the use of e-mails, while students may prefer to receive updates through a variety of social media platforms or text messages. Fernandez and Shaw (2021) report that following Hurricane Katrina, a variety of messaging tools, apps and social media were used to communicate with all stakeholders and this created a sense of community, belonging and trust and helped reduce anxiety.

Time is a major factor when it comes to making decisions using the best information available (Heffernan et al., 2019). Unlike during the pre-Covid-19 times when school leaders had long periods of consultation, the current context requires that decisions be

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made quickly and should try to balance the demands of doing the best thing for students, staff and meeting policy and political imperatives and directives.

Fernandez and Shaw (2021) highlight three of the leadership best practices for navigating unpredictable adaptive challenges such as the ones posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in schools. These are servant leadership, Distributed leadership and Adaptive leadership. Servant leadership emphasises empowerment, involvement, collaboration, emotional intelligence and emotional stability. Distributed leadership entails distributing leadership responsibilities to a network of teams throughout the school to improve the quality of the decisions made in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, Adaptive leadership entails adopting a leadership style that is flexible, allostatic and capable of learning, evolving in crisis and emerging better able to address future crises. Um-e-Rubbab et al., (2021) confirm that there is a positive and significant relationship between leadership style and employees' psychological, physical and social well-being. This study is consistent with many other studies that claim that employees' well-being hinge on leadership.

A study by Irshad et al., (2021) reveals that leaders can use safety specific transformational leadership as a suitable leadership style that combines with employee safety consciousness and dampens the covid-19 perceived risk among employees. This reduction in perceived risk improves psychological well-being among employees. This decrease in risk leaves a positive impact on employees by enhancing their psychological well-being. The study concludes that safety transformational leadership and safety consciousness among employees decrease Covid-19 perceived risk, leading to an increase in the psychological well-being of employees. These results are consistent with existing studies which have shown that safety specific leadership promotes perceived safety and other positive outcomes among employees (Conchie and Donald, 2009; Johnson, 2019; Smith et al., 2020). A decrease in covid-19 perceived risk causes improvement in the mental health of employees when the leadership take solid measures to ensure the safety of workers (Ahmed et al., 2020; Bashirian et al., 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020b; Haque, 2021).

Usman et al., (2021) carried out a study to investigate participative leaders' impact on employees' outcomes, in particular employees' workplace thriving and helping behaviours while also exploring the moderating effect of a leader's behavioural integrity. Specifically, the idea was to determine whether participative leaders help employees in a crisis-induced work environment to nurture them to thriving and increase their helping behaviours. Importantly, this study aimed at contributing to a participative leadership role in the context-19 context by exploring two critical issues.

Findings indicate that participative leadership positively relates to employees' thriving and helping behaviours during the crisis. They also reveal that the relationship between participative leadership and employees' work-related outcomes was contingent on the manager's perceived integrity.

The study made three distinct theoretical contributions. First, this study advances the participative leadership literature in the novel COVID-19 context by showing that the participative leadership style nurtures employees' workplace thriving and helping behaviours. Consistent with prior studies, results show a positive relationship between participative leadership and employees' workplace thriving. An important characteristic of participative leadership is embedded in the leader-subordinate relationship, which genuinely gives followers greater discretion, attention, support, and empowerment in decisions (Nystrom, 1990), ultimately enhancing their vitality and learning motivation at work. Second, participative leaders' behaviours stimulate the development of a smooth relationship with helping behaviours. These findings of a positive relationship between participative leadership and work-related outcomes extend the previous empirical findings (Chan, 2019; Chang et al., 2019) from the leadership level to the subordinate level.

Bajaba et al., (2021) carried out a study to determine the role of adaptive leadership in the rise of effective leaders during the covid-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that leaders with an adaptive personality are more likely to have high levels of belief in their capacity to lead during the times of a pandemic such as covid-19. The study further found that such high levels of belief are in an important way related to motivation to lead. Leaders who demonstrated adaptive leadership were identifiable by their calmness in times of difficulty and uncertainty whilst at the same time quickly looking for ways to deal with such times (ibid, 2021). They solved problems by creating new ideas and were constantly on the lookout for new ways of improving their work. Bajaba et al., (2021) are of the view that such leaders welcomed employees' views and cooperated with them.

CONCLUSIONS

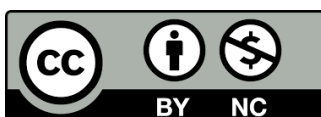
This paper highlights the kind of leadership that school heads can use to manage the disruptive change brought by the Covid Leadership is rapidly evolving in response to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. The scope and the speed of change suggests that it cannot continue under an assumption of "business as usual." Instead, a fundamentally different approach to leading is required. This paper contends that complexity leadership offers the best lens to understanding and managing this change. Through complexity leadership, school heads can apprehend and make sense of broad-ranging trends, as well as the urgent need to plan for and provide systemic responses.

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