

A Conception Of Educational Leadership

A. HARRY PASSOW

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH ASSOCIATE HORACE MANN-LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL EXPERIMENTATION

ONE set of circumstances distinguishes the present crucial demand for strong educational leadership from past demands: the pressures for change in school and society outweigh any in the past century. Freedom, democracy, human dignity are under fire. The repercussions of this upheaval are reaching into almost every community in the land. No other period of civilization has witnessed the kinds of changes which have occurred in the past half century and are continuing. Scarcely a single aspect of present-day society has not been altered markedly in this brief period. Building a school program to keep pace with—let alone contribute to—change requires effective educational leadership.

Whether the schools meet then: responsibilities for providing experiences which will help prepare individuals to live effectively in a changing society subject to many kinds of pressures depends, to a large extent, on the caliber of leadership in a community's schools. Failure or only partial success in bringing about curriculum changes may be the result of poor leadership which, in turn, may stem from a hazy understanding of the nature of leadership.

The widespread agreement which seems to exist regarding the critical importance of leadership in bringing about curriculum improvements does not carry over to the meaning of leadership. The terms leader and leadership are used freely in literature and discussions, but with a variety of meanings. Sometimes the specific meaning can be determined from the context in which the terms are used; often it can only be inferred. To some, leadership means dominance; to others it means guidance. Some writers use the word to describe a function; others use it to mean a personality trait. The fact that leadership means different things to different individuals emphasizes a need for developing a clear concept of the nature of leadership, which

can then be applied to the instructional area. In a way this involves identifying the animal before attempting to improve his breed.

A CONCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP

An analysis of a number of studies and articles¹ helped in the formulation of a conception of leadership as a group-related process. The elements of such a conception follow.

Leadership is a process of group interaction. Attempts to identify a single trait or cluster of traits to account for leadership have not been fruitful. Many of the same basic aptitudes, skills, and personal qualities are common to both leaders and non-leaders. Personality traits of recognized leaders in diverse situations are often quite different. At the same time, many of the differences between leaders and non-leaders in a particular group, although statistically significant, seem inconclusive and less reliable for the population generally.

Leadership is neither a trait nor a quality which exists by itself. Rather, it is a social process in which an individual, as a result of behavior by and toward other group members, is raised to a leader role by members of the group. It is a circular process: it emerges as a product of interacting forces and in turn affects these forces. The leader is influenced by the activities and attitudes of the group and at the same time influences these.

Members of any group are constantly in some kind of dynamic psychosocial relationship with one another. This interdependence in behavior and identification with group goals are basic conditions of all groups. Behavior of individual members has a direct influence upon the behavior of other group members; changes in any part of the group produce some change in the group as a whole. Consequently, no leader role is entirely

independent of the group situation from which it emerges nor can an individual function as a leader completely divorced from a group. Even autocratic leaders are controlled to some extent by the needs and interests of the members of the group. They cannot ignore the goals, values, and expectations of group members if they are to continue as recognized leaders, even though their actions may tend to restructure these goals.

Some official positions or the possession of certain skills (applicable only to a specific situation) may tend to facilitate the emergence of leadership. However, they do not guarantee its permanence. For example, a principal may be able to assume a leadership role in a faculty meeting more readily than Teacher A, because of his official position. If the meeting should be concerned with a discussion of reading problems in the lower grades, Teacher A's knowledge as a teacher of third-grade reading may enable her to assume a leader role during this discussion. Within a faculty group, both the principal and the teacher may exercise leadership for a time. In either case, however, leadership emerges as a function of the needs of the specific situation and not because of the principal's position or the teacher's skills or personality. Were the discussion centered on some other topic, it might be that neither of these two persons would exercise leadership.

Leadership emerges 'when an individual is perceived by some members of a group as having or controlling means which will help in the identification or attainment of group and/or individual goals.² Individuals and groups are continuously seeking to attain goals or maintain existing satisfactions. These goals vary from time to time and from situation to situation. The means which individuals and groups discern as being helpful in attaining these goals will differ as will their awareness of which persons either possess or control these means. For example, the goals of a faculty may vary from wanting to improve pupil achievement to securing more adequate supplies. An individual teacher may want to get along better with his colleagues, gain greater prestige or salary, or acquire the affection and respect of his students. Different means

will be needed to achieve these goals. The person recognized as having the competencies, insights, or means required to attain the group or individual goal will be looked to for leadership in that particular situation. When one or more members of a group view an individual as being able to provide help with the clarification or attainment of a desired goal, they will look to the person as a leader.

More than one individual may be able to provide help in goal attainment, in which case individuals may choose the person they think will provide the best or most appropriate means or the one who is best able to maintain existing satisfactions. The person chosen in a particular situation may not be selected in one which is relatively similar.

That these assets are relative to the setting suggests either that they develop out of past leadership experiences or that individuals possessing necessary means are attracted to leader roles in this particular kind of situation. Individuals in the act of responding to group needs, adapt, learn, and modify their behavior. The character, personality, and capabilities of an individual may be modified by altering the social atmosphere of his group.

The functions of a leader may lie either in satisfying group needs or in protecting existent satisfactions. For example, the principal may be in a position to recommend the increased salaries desired by a faculty group (helping to satisfy group needs) or to prevent a change in teaching loads with which the staff is content (protect existent satisfactions). Because he controls these means to goal attainment or maintenance of satisfactions, he may be recognized by teachers as a leader in some circumstances.

A group may come to accept an individual's objectives for its own because of loyalty, fear, gratitude, or some other reason. At any rate, the leader gains his role only as he is perceived and reacted to as possessing or controlling the means required for goal clarification or goal achievement—either current or future.

Although an individual is accepted as a leader because of his control of means, this gives him no permanent lien on leadership. He will continue to lead only as long as he is believed to have possession or control of these desired means. These perceptions may not correspond with reality. An individual having a leader role in one situation may be seen as having means another group wishes to use although this may subsequently prove not to be the case. This "halo effect" is common and results in groups' assigning leader roles to individuals who actually do not possess means for attaining goals. For example, the principal who controls many means needed for maintaining certain satisfactions is looked to for leadership in situations where he may not have the necessary understandings or skills. Because of the "halo effect," groups tend to expect better means from certain individuals and look to these persons for leadership in general. Though an individual may not possess or control means, as long as the group thinks he does, he will continue in a leader role. This is sometimes a reason for ineffective leadership.

A person who is thought by one group to possess means to goal attainment may not be so considered by another group. Although all group members may desire substantially the same goals, they may not all recognize the same individual as being able to provide help in attaining these goals. The difference may lie in the perceptions of the kinds of means necessary for goal attainment or in recognition of the same individual as possessing these means. For example, a faculty may be united in wanting a solution to a particular problem. Some teachers may feel that the solution requires aggressive or forceful action, while others may think that the difficulty "will work itself out" if given enough time. The individual who could provide leadership if one course is taken may not be able to help if other means are needed. Teachers who prefer bargaining to taking no action will seek as leaders individuals who would not be recognized as providing leadership if force was seen as the desired means of attaining the goal.

Psychological factors (both individual and group) affect the emergence of leadership.

Group leadership satisfies not only group objectives but also individual or "accessory needs." Individuals may seek opportunities to lead or they may shy away from leading. Their hunger for prestige, recognition, status, or group identification as well as emotional satisfactions may be served by leadership activities. These deeply personal individual needs are intertwined in the group structure. Relevant or irrelevant to the group needs or goals, they are highly important in the emergence of leadership. The psychology and experiences of individuals may predispose them to accept or reject different kinds of leader roles for either themselves or others. Changes in the psychological climate of individuals or groups may lead to the emergence of different leaders.

Such special needs as dominance, submission, service, and sacrifice may be satisfied through exercising leadership functions. A leader who at times may seem to be frustrating certain individuals in a group may actually be satisfying either his own personal needs or the needs of some others in the group.

The psychology of the potential leader who is willing to assume such a role is often a key factor in the emergence of leadership. Individuals, knowingly or not, may seek situations in which the means they possess will be needed, so that they will be recognized as leaders. There are situations in which all factors are favorable to the emergence of leadership—a group faces problems in achieving its goals, individuals are aware of pressing needs—and yet no leaders come forth. One reason may be that no individual in the group is recognized as possessing the means to help the group in goal attainment. An alternative reason may be the psychology of the potential leader, for unless there are group members whose needs may be satisfied through exercising leadership functions there is no assurance that leadership will emerge.

The process of leadership is one in which more than a single individual may play a relatively important role. In terms of functions essential to the achievement of personal and group objectives, many kinds of leadership activities may be carried on by

more than one individual. Several individuals may be able to provide different means for reaching the same objectives. By their activities and service, all these persons may play leadership roles.

Benne and Sheats have catalogued some of the kinds of functional roles which may be played either by the group chairman or by various members in a face-to-face group. They divide these roles into three categories: group-task roles which facilitate and coordinate group efforts in the selection, definition, and solution of a common problem (initiator-coordinator, information seeker, opinion giver, procedural technician, recorder, and others); group-building and maintenance roles which build and perpetuate group-centered attitudes and orientation among members (such as harmonizer, compromiser, gatekeeper, expeditor); and individual roles which satisfy personal needs rather than group tasks (aggressor, blocker, recognition seeker, dominator, and others).³

Similarly, Krech and Crutchfield have listed a variety of functions which may have to be performed in either a primary or a secondary group. The leader may act as executive, planner, policy maker, expert, external group representative, controller of internal relationships, purveyor of rewards and punishments, arbitrator and mediator, group symbol surrogate for individual responsibility, ideologist, father figure, or scapegoat.⁴

These classifications suggest the many kinds of leader functions in groups and indicate the diverse capacities required of individuals to fill these needs. Since many roles are not mutually exclusive, an individual may play several roles at the same time in a given group. He may, for example, serve as expert, policy maker, and scapegoat at the same time. These are roles which outside consultants often fill when working with teacher groups on curriculum problems. While they are looked to as experts, they also serve as scapegoats as difficulties are encountered along the way.

Clearly, the same person can be both leader and non-leader either in two different situations or in the same situation at

different times. In a group meeting, an individual may play several different leader roles or, at times, exercise no leadership whatsoever.

The methods by which an individual may emerge in a leader role are varied. An individual may be elected by a group to fill a position. In this case the actual election indicates their confidence that he possesses skills and understandings to do a certain job. Appointment also raises leaders, but this procedure may be less popular than election. Individuals may be spontaneously accepted by a group because they possess or control means. This is more common in small groups, where members recognize that a job has to be done and know which individuals can do it. Still another method by which leaders emerge is through sheer force or strength by which they structure a group's behavior or change its objectives. Such leadership is based on the group's perception of the potential leader's abilities and his control over means, as well as the consideration of alternatives available to the group.

The school principal who is expected to provide instructional and administrative leadership for the faculty is appointed by a board of education. The board's objectives and the principal's goals may be different from the goals of the group he is to lead. Nevertheless, the principal may still be considered by teachers to control means important to their satisfaction attainment. Some of these controls accrue to his official position—he may be able to bestow or withhold promotions, facilitate the purchasing of supplies, arrange desirable schedules, or provide time for in-service training. Other means may be personal—special competencies in building reading programs, ability to chair meetings, or talent in encouraging staff members and creating a healthy social climate. The board of education appoints the principal to a status position but his recognition as an educational leader depends on the perceptions of the group. Because of his skills, knowledge, and attitudes, the principal may be seen as a leader in roles other than those which seem to go with his appointment. On the other hand, the

teachers may actually look to one of their own colleagues for instructional leadership.

Leader roles may be imposed from outside the group, be structured by the group, or emerge as a product of interacting factors within the group. Regardless of the method, a functional relationship will exist between the individual and the group if leadership is exercised.

There may be no sharp dichotomy between "leader" and "group member" As indicated earlier, the variety of leader roles in terms of functions to be performed in a group sometimes obscures the lines between leadership and membership. Every member may be potentially capable of contributing to the resolution of group problems. Actually, not all potentialities may be realized. Because of special qualifications or needs, leadership may be concentrated in one member or diffused among the entire group. A number of factors—group structure, group goals, and general psychological climate—may influence the diffusion of leadership and govern the extent to which individuals are able to move in and out of leader and member roles.

The dividing line between leaders and members is flexible. As groups become rigidly structured, the diffusion or emergence of new leadership may be seriously hampered or curtailed. However formal and rigid an organization may be, there will still exist some informal subgroups and relationships which will permit shifts in leader-member roles. Conversely, the informal and fluid organization may still tend to select individuals with certain characteristics and to block others. Legal limitations and group expectations may restrict diffusion of some leadership functions. If a group comes to expect better techniques from a particular individual, he may be selected as a leader even though another person may be better qualified.

Situational factors will determine the quality of leader roles. In a primary group, individual and group socio-psychological factors tend to enlarge or shrink the maximum contribution of each member. Whether group members are free to participate and to lead depends on a complex matrix of

situational factors. These include the following:

1. The goals which individuals and groups seek to identify and achieve—the desirable needs to be satisfied or maintained through association with a particular group or individual.
2. The goals of potential leaders in the group.
3. The kinds of means available to the group and believed to be most helpful in clarifying or attaining goals; the recognition by the group of those individuals who actually or potentially control or can provide the means for goal attainment. These include the personality, skills, insights, and powers that the potential leader actually possesses as well as the group's perceptions of these personal means. Groups act on these perceptions even if reality denies them.
4. The formal and informal organization which facilitates or impedes the emergence of leadership, such as rigidity of status hierarchies, degree of flexibility in activities, role expectations of individuals, and amount of freedom of the group to structure its own activities.
5. Individual and group psychological forces, ideologies, and established values within which the group leaders operate.
6. External factors from the larger social setting within which the group operates—legal structure, status systems, institutional pressures, local mores, community resources, for example.

Democratic leadership is difficult in an authoritarian structure. The stereotype of leadership in a rigid, formal organization would almost guarantee arbitrary action. If there exists a structure of authority and control in which individuals strive for dominant roles, these factors interacting in the total situation will shape leadership patterns. Altering the social atmosphere of a group—that is, some of the situational factors—may change the quality of the emergent leadership.

A DEFINITION AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

The seven elements discussed above fuse into this definition: Leadership is an interactive process in which the leader is one who is perceived as providing help, real or potential, with the means the group and individuals desire to use for clarifying or achieving goals.

This definition emerges from a conception which is group oriented and a hypothesis which views leadership neither as a trait nor as a personal quality but as a process dependent on many interacting situational factors. The definition is in some ways broader and in others narrower than most common uses of the term. It is broader in that it includes all activities perceived by group members as helpful toward goal attainment, but narrower because it restricts leadership to this direction of activities.

The key to the leadership process is found in the activities carried on by potential leaders and the reactions to these activities by group members. For the potential leader concerned with instructional improvement, these activities seem to fall into six fluid and interrelated areas: improving group effectiveness, stimulating and releasing members' potentialities, coordinating individual and group undertakings, facilitating communication, furnishing needed expertness, and improving human relations. As the curriculum worker carries out his functions and fulfills responsibilities in these six broad areas, some of his actions and his direction of activities will be seen as providing means to goal attainment. In these activities and roles the individual will be recognized as a leader.

Such a conception and definition help direct efforts toward developing more effective leadership in the following ways:

1. They separate the leadership process from a particular individual or status position. This process is involved in many activities of a status person, and his total job involves leadership—but it is not his total job. Recognition of this distinction is important; it brings attention to the fact that a status

person is not a leader per se but only when his direction of activities helps in the clarification and selection of goals and means. This differentiation gives greater substance and meaning to the term leadership. When clarity is lacking, efforts toward improvement are often frustrated.

2. They point out that many individuals, regardless of status position, are capable of exercising leadership, since they control some means that the group may want to use in attaining its goals. Status persons are often in a position to encourage the exercising of leadership by many individuals. Leadership may be strengthened and made more effective as it is dispersed and multiplied.

3. They direct attention toward the development of training techniques which build competencies and insights specific to the task of instructional improvement rather than general personality traits. Such training should include more testing out in action and evaluating the effects of individual behavior in the group. Such a concept stresses the belief that individuals can acquire the means for leading and can learn how to lead more effectively; they need not be born with certain traits.

4. They suggest that while the quality of leadership is dependent on situational factors, one of the key factors is the potential leader himself. Effective leadership is often directed toward becoming more "democratic" or "cooperative" or "group centered." When the leader is skilled in clarification and selection of goals and means which are mutually acceptable to group members, the emergence of quality leadership is more likely. The attitudes, skills, and understandings which enable an individual to work with others in selecting mutual means and goals can be acquired.

IN CONCLUSION

The demand for effective educational leadership is neither new nor peculiar to these times, although a combination of forces has tended to emphasize current needs. Every age seems to have its own threats and crises, all of which have

stimulated the emergence of leadership. But more than crisis leadership is needed in education today. Continuing, constructive leadership is essential in the ongoing day-to-day activities as well as the more difficult situations. Effective leadership will grow with increased understanding of the nature of leadership, how it emerges, how it becomes autocratic or democratic, how it becomes a help or a hindrance. It will emerge when individuals apply a research approach to the

problem of improvement—testing the effect and effectiveness of individual behavior in groups, gathering data related not to personal traits but to actions and the differences they make in the identification and attainment of goals. It will improve when individuals cease to talk glibly about "a great need for leaders" and begin to take a more deliberate approach to the scientific ways of making their own leadership more effective.

1 A. Harry Passow, "Group-Centered Curriculum Leadership" (Unpublished Ed.D. Project Report, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1951), pp. 10-54.

2 Irving Knickerbocker, "Leadership: A Conception and Some Implications." *The Journal of Social Issues*, Summer 1948.

3 Kenneth D. Benne and Paul Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members." *Journal of Social Issues*, 4:41-49, Spring 1948. Each of twenty-nine roles is described and illustrated.

4 David Krech and Richard Crutchfield, *Theory and Problems of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1948), pp. 417-22.