

# An Analysis of Distributed Leadership Implementation In Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Many policymakers have sought greater levels of success in schools by implementing more distributive models of leadership, yet many have not achieved desired outcomes. This grounded theory study uncovers what happens within a school organization as it moves from a traditional leadership model to a district mandated distributive leadership model.

## PROBLEM

Over the last decade, research has examined the positive effects of distributed leadership (Abbey, Andrews, & Cashen, 2006; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Dirkswager, 2002; Donaldson, Bowe, Mackenzie, & Marnik, 2004; Donhost & Hoover, 2007; Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2005; Kerchner et al., 1998; Lambert, 2003). Yet, little research has examined or investigated the transition from a traditional leadership model to a mandated distributed leadership model. Although the above research makes interesting predictions, none has truly taken the time to conduct an inductive approach like grounded theory (GT) (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to a distributed model. This GT study investigated what is going on with teachers at the high schools in the Grande Unified School District regarding this transition.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this doctoral study was to generate a GT regarding leadership in the Grande Unified School District (GUSD). As the GUSD moves forward with negotiations and tries to determine ways to improve the district, questions about the effectiveness of mandated leadership teams were prominent. Distributed leadership is the idea that leadership does not rest with one individual in a top down model, but rather it is a part of the definitive behavior of professionals and not the sole right of those with a specific title (Donaldson, 2006; Elmore, 2007; Lambert, 2003; Lambert et al., 2002, Surowiecki, 2004).

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

In accordance with GT, the only literature used initially was for developing the interest area and grand tour question. No subsequent literature was considered until the theory was almost fully developed. Literature had to earn its way into the theory just as interview data had, using the constant comparative analysis method for theory generation. Highlights of literature that was integrated into the study included topics related to the effects of distributing leadership within the school environment (Education Evolving, 2010; Lambert, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Wong & Wong, 2006), Article 24 of the Grande Unified School District (GSUD) contract (Collective Bargaining Contract, 2007), Lambert's matrix (2003), and literature that supported the emergent theory itself.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goal of a classic grounded theorist is to reduce instances of preconception or the forcing of predetermined ideas. Instead, someone embarking on the journey of a GT study begins only by selecting an area of interest (Raffanti, 2006, p. 23) and not with a set of research questions. The area of interest for this GT study came from efforts to implement article 24 of the union/district contract in the school district where Ed teaches. This led to the development of a study on leadership, and prompted the single starting question in a GT study, the *grand tour question* (Lafler, 2006; Maddy, 2008; Olson, 2006; Raffanti, 2005; Simmons & Gregory, 2003; Toscano, 2008). The grand-tour question for this study is:

“Will you tell me about leadership here at your site?”

## PROCEDURES

- Conducted first round of interviews – opened with grand tour question
- Coded data after each interview – compared codes looking for emergent themes.
- Through constant comparative analysis – a rigorous and inductive process – several categories emerged that were analyzed, coded, and conceptualized.
- Conceptualized categories formed the basis of the theory.
- Subsequent interviews began with the grand tour question, but were guided by codes and categories that emerged from the previous interviews – leading to saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45).
- No school was excluded from the data collection process, even if only one or two of the leadership team members participated.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were collected largely through participant interviews. In GT data analysis takes place through the use of constant comparative analysis. The researcher must continuously ask how one set of information compares to other data already gathered. Interviews were coded using open coding to both get at the underlying meaning of the words and to establish a relationship between the data and theory (Glaser, 1978). As the core variables emerged, a selective coding process enabled the researcher to focus the work. The next step in the data analysis procedure is establishment of theoretical codes which conceive relationships between the substantive codes. Out of the process of generating codes comes the memoing stage; involving the writing up of ideas in codes and their relationships, which signals the beginning of formalizing the theory generation.

## FINDINGS

Distributing leadership (Burgess, 2011) is the non-sequential path some organizations travel when they want to move from a patriarchal leadership structure to one where employees are a part of shared leadership model. It consists of four main categories which contain the various elements of the theory, and which the organization may traverse a number of times in a number of ways. The four categories are:

- 1. Building a Plan** - This category refers to the desire a group or organization to move from a traditional form of leadership to a model that reflects shared or democratic principles. Building a Plan includes possible motivations for leadership change, visions of the better future, and some of the tools necessary to get there.
- 2. Barriers** - Those issues that arise in opposition to the expressed interests of the change to the leadership model. Barriers are difficulties that are severe enough as to derail the entire process, so that the change proposed may never occur, or occur in name only.
- 3. Distribution** - Those issues that an organization may face when transitioning from a traditional model of leadership to a model that distributes leadership throughout the work site. They may have the potential to derail the process, but more commonly they are issues of training and practicality. While they are similar in many ways to Barriers, issues of distribution are merely stumbling blocks an organization experiences on its way toward distributed leadership.
- 4. Recounting the Story** - A reflection of the experiences that individuals have when they become part of leadership in a distributed leadership model. This category conceptualizes not only an employee leader's experiences serving on leadership teams, but also their motivations, and hopes in doing so.

## LIMITATIONS

At the outset, there were several limitations to this study which could impact the ability to extrapolate these findings to the larger population. The first was that interviews conducted with educators currently involved with leadership in the GUSD. This limits the number of teachers who share their input. The second is the time factor. This study was only able to address how the respondents feel at this time, and does not allow for how things might be given more time or future events.

## CONCLUSIONS

Distributing leadership among the workers within an organization is not only a plausible way to lead, it may provide the best option for creating a stable, insightful, and ultimately successful environment for both workers and clients. Once leadership teams have been established and individuals begin to see themselves as leaders, the work environment can be radically improved. Individual workers become concerned about the success of the whole. Successful leaders tend to focus on serving the needs of their colleagues, clients, and the greater good. This both ennobles and empowers them to support others in becoming leaders. Employees stay at their work site longer, building a wealth of knowledge that they can utilize to become better leaders and assist others to do the same. With constant ongoing training, empowerment to make decisions, and a democratized process; distributed leadership and leadership teams provides an excellent alternative to traditional forms of leadership.

## SOCIAL CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

Local Level: The implications include the development of ongoing trainings, a leveling of the hierarchy at the schools, the use of feedback loops between leadership and staff, operational guides to help newly formed leadership teams, and the creation of feedback loops between district and leadership teams. Several others merit emphasis, including the importance of diversity and dissention, annual trainings, and the empowerment of those leadership teams to make decisions in the best interests of their staff and clients.

State and National Level: A re-examination of what it means to distribute leadership among the workers of any organization. Schools can break the cycle of abuse by authoritarian principals by relying more on leadership teams. Evidence suggests that the popularity of smaller management teams is increasing, but they are not given the authority that would enable the organization as a whole to benefit from their existence (Surowiecki, 2005, pp. 190-191). It is hoped that state and national organizations such as the California Teachers' Association and the National Education Association will examine the results of this study and incorporate the theory into the future development of leadership teams within the educational system.

