Strategies for Effective School Leadership and Organizational Development

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Abstract

This article explores strategies for effective school leadership and organizational development based on four qualitative interviews with school leaders in the Ontario region of Canada. The study is grounded in transformational leadership theory, using its four core elements idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as the analytical framework. The findings demonstrate how school leaders, through acting as role models, fostering shared visions, encouraging innovation, and addressing individual needs, contribute to the development of professional learning communities and enhanced organizational capacity. The study also highlights the importance of balancing transformational and transactional leadership approaches to ensure both structure and innovation, combining external expectations with internal motivation. Leadership is portrayed as a relational process built on trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility. The article is relevant for school leaders, education administrators, and researchers interested in leadership and school development in both international and Norwegian contexts.

Keywords*: Transformational Leadership, School Leadership, Organizational Development*

1. Introduction

This article explores strategies for effective school leadership and organizational development through qualitative research interviews. Leadership as a field of knowledge is emphasized in this study with its use of transformational leadership as an analytical framework[1]. Mintzberg's leadership theories [12] describe leadership as something that must be learned through experience and be rooted in the context in which it occurs. Leadership takes place at the intersection of art, craft, and science. Art brings ideas and integration, craft creates coherence and builds practical professional experience, and science contributes structure and order through systematic analysis of knowledge.

Influenced by frameworks such as the Ontario Leadership Framework[3], successful leaders in the Ontario region of Canada emphasize the development of personal leadership resources, including self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and organizational understanding. The framework highlights the importance of building personal leadership capacities, which are essential for managing change and leading professional learning communities [4]. School leaders play a central role in shaping a vision that aligns with the school's goals and everyday practice. Empathy and availability are identified as key traits of effective leadership. Leaders who engage in open communication and empower staff build trust and promote a culture of collaboration [15].

Digital tools and platforms have become integrated into modern leadership, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders who effectively utilize digital technologies for communication and professional development can enhance collaboration within their schools [7]. These technologies have enabled leaders to adapt to changing circumstances and ensure continuous learning for both teachers and students.

The Faculty of Education and Arts at Nord university, Norway, and the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, Canada, have established a joint partnership: the CANOPY Project (Canada-Norway for Education Partnership and Inclusion in Education, 2020–2024) [3]. The partnership aims, among others, to address the challenges facing the education sector from a comprehensive and international perspective. By linking educational research, classroom experience, student mobility, and

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[3] Ontario Leadership Framework :: Research-backed resources

institutional leadership, CANOPY has developed expertise in pedagogy, research, and training through international collaboration.

This study takes a closer look at the experiences of school leaders in the Ontario region as they work to develop strategies for their own organizations. The research question is formulated as follows: *What experiences do school leaders in Ontario have in developing leadership strategies at their own schools?* The study seeks to explore school leadership as a platform for collaborative development. Transformational leadership is a form of leadership that influences not only principals but also the leadership teams and teaching staff at the school.

This study therefore emphasizes bringing learning back into the schools to influence actions and lead to improvements. The article is relevant to the field of education in both in Norwegian, Canadian and other contexts and is aimed at school leaders, school owners, and students in leadership education programs. The article will emphasize the theoretical knowledge base and present findings based on the experiences of four school leaders in Ontario, Canada. Transformational leadership, divided into four key elements, forms the theoretical framework for the study, with an emphasis on the school leaders' ability to make strategic choices and influence staff toward active engagement. Finally, the empirical findings and key themes will be highlighted and discussed in light of relevant theory"

2. Knowledge Overview

In this article, we have chosen to use the theory of transformational leadership and transactional leadership as the theoretical foundation. With a focus on how school leaders develop strategies for effective school leadership and organizational development in the workplace, we also include elements from transactional leadership to clarify contrasts and differences.

Transactional leadership is oriented toward performance and rewards in the relationship between leaders and employees. Performance and rewards are typically agreed upon through clear contracts, rules, and expectations between the parties [2]. This can be seen as the leader percieved performance from the employee's work, and rewarding it according to what has been agreed upon. Control and close follow-up characterize this leadership approach [8]. In a school leadership context, this can contribute to predictability and efficient use of resources. However, it may also limit development and professional autonomy. During significant changes in schools, as seen in Ontario, traces of transactional leadership can be identified [6]. In Norwegian schools, the implementation of reform ideas has often been characterized by standardization, goal management, and centralization [18]. Transactional leadership can result in leaders and teachers experiencing limited autonomy, professional freedom, and trust, as management and control become more dominant than relational leadership and professional judgment [9].

As an element, transactional leadership can provide predictability and security in change processes by clearly defining expectations, performance, and rewards. At the same time, it can create resistance and barriers when there is too much focus on external rewards and goal achievement rather than internal motivation [8]. School leaders in Ontario are aware of the need to balance external and internal motivation [6]. It is especially important to lead staff based on their internal motivation and intrinsic drive. Therefore, it is important to work with ethics, empathy, and relationships within the professional community, which can help focus on interpersonal relationships and build capacity through shared vision, understanding, and engagement [5].

Clear agreements and expectations, management, and control are natural aspects of working life. At the same time, the best results are often achieved through internal motivation and genuine commitment, just as in sports. Teams with good individual players build collective quality and capacity by supporting each other, ensuring teamwork, relationships, and good communication toward a common goalwinning. Transformational leadership is an important element in fostering collective team building and capacity [17]. One example is the football club Bodoe/Glimt in Bodoe, a town in Nordland County, Norway. This small team has become internationally recognized through strong teamwork, organizational development, and a good balance between different leadership styles, including transactional and transformational leadership.

Wennes and Irgens [22] explain that leadership, on the one hand, can be understood as a relational phenomenon that is socially constructed. School leadership, from this perspective, can be defined as relational leadership, which involves building trust and relationships among school actors to enable learning processes. Relational leadership implies a mentoring relationship, where both the mentor and the mentee grow, develop, and learn something new. On the other hand, Wennes and Irgens [22] argue that leadership is about goal-oriented influence, where it is essential for leaders to adapt their leadership style so that others can be led toward predetermined goals. In this view, the school can be

defined as instrumental management tool for national goals, guidelines, and legislation, where the leader reports back based on procedures, routines, and control systems. Robinson [16] states that successful school leaders set clear goals. This means that they are active and have clear expectations that all staff work toward achieving shared objectives. School leaders can use professional resources strategically and channel them into tasks aimed at improving student learning. and teachers continuing professional development.

Transformational leadership is based on inspiring and motivating employees that create meaning through shared visions and values. The leader should act as an important role model and strive to elevate employees to a higher level in order to optimize engagement and willingness to contribute [8]. Therefore, school leaders should be closely involved with their staff in the professional learning community, highlighting values and visions as sources of inspiration to contribute through collaboration and mutual effort toward common goals.

Transformational leadership as a leadership style is often better suited to anchoring and motivating change and reform ideas in organizations than transactional leadership. It focuses on participation, trust, and processes that foster co-creation in the professional community [18]. Transformational leadership, along with trust-based management, aligns well with managing knowledge workers because it is based on professional trust, accountability, and autonomy [9]. These are elements that many knowledge workers identify with. Knowledge workers often thrive when they can contribute their expertise as part of a community to achieve shared goals. Transformational leadership supports organizational development and learning by engaging staff in change and development processes. The leadership style emphasizes that employees can build a shared vision for the future [8]. Consequently, school leaders can build teams and engagement to implement important and necessary changes for the benefit of students' learning and development.

Transformational leadership can also be expressed through trust-based management and leadership. This leadership style can help create space for professional judgment and collective learning through professional learning communities. The school leader plays a central role as a facilitator and leader of the learning community's work with development processes [9]. Effective organizational development requires leadership that can consciously balance transactional and transformational approaches. Transactional leadership can ensure structure and accountability in the organization as a foundation. At the same time, transformational leadership and trust-based management can contribute to long-term learning, innovation, and collective development [18][8][9].

Leithwood & Sun [10] define transformational leadership as developing internal motivation and commitment within a united faculty toward shared goals. Through systematic searches and literature reviews, Leithwood and Sun [10] concluded that transformational leadership had a particularly positive effect in schools when the focus was on a common vision among colleagues, supporting practices, and promoting collaboration. Strong connections were found between transformational leadership, teacher engagement, and the application of knowledge-based teaching practices. In summary, the knowledge overview shows that transactional leadership emphasizes control through clear goals, monitoring, and rewards. Transformational leadership focuses on stimulating engagement, shared vision, and innovation to strengthen professional learning communities by creating a culture of sharing, co-creation, and continuous improvement [8][18].

3. Method

This qualitative study is inspired by phenomenology, where the researchers aim, through the research question, to uncover the experiences of school leaders to obtain a rich and detailed dataset [21]. Semi-structured interviews with pre-defined themes were used to allow for follow-up questions [14]. This approach gave the participating school leaders the opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives and experiences and to contribute to the development of new descriptions, concepts, or models. Qualitative research methods are open within the field to ensure the generation of new knowledge in areas where little prior research exists [11]. A strategic selection of school leaders was made, based on prior collaboration with the researchers through a joint development project (CANOPY), to shed light on the research question as effectively as possible.

The analysis is based on transformational leadership [1]. The four core elements of transformational leadership are used as analytical tools and serve as headings in the presentation of findings: Idealized Influence/Charisma, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. These core elements are also referred to as the Four I's Bass [1]: **Idealized Influence/Charisma.** This emphasizes that the leader influences by modeling behaviors that others can look up to. This can build trust, respect, and pride. **Inspiration.** This highlights the leader's ability to articulate expectations and

ambitions that resonate with employees, and that they can identify with and make their own. **Intellectual Stimulation.** A fundamental assumption about employees is that they can and want to be challenged, seek renewal, and are ready to take responsibility for solving problems. **Individualized Consideration.** The ability to "see" each individual employee, provide guidance, and recognize their unique potential.

The analysis provided constructive insight into the data and enabled comparisons across the interviews conducted. This contributed to a structured presentation and categorization of findings within the framework of the theoretical core elements of transformational leadership. Qualitative interviews were conducted with four school leaders from the Ontario region, all of whom have several years of experience as school leaders and developers. Familiarity with the studied environment represents both a strength and a limitation of the study [19]. All informants provided written informed consent.

4. Results and Discussion

Transformational leadership is characterized by leaders' ability to inspire, influence, and develop staff by creating a shared vision, encouraging innovation, and addressing individual needs. The analysis of quotes from the informants highlights how these leaders practice transformational leadership in their respective contexts [1]. They emphasize the importance of idealized influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as key elements in building strong school communities. This particularly illustrates how personal integrity, and an inclusive leadership style allow for collective ownership and development. Two of the informants highlight the value of case studies and structured reflection as tools for professional growth. The leaders underline that leadership is about more than administration, it is a dynamic interplay of trust, support, and visionary thinking that creates fertile ground for learning and innovation.

5. Idealized Influence / Charisma

Idealized influence refers to a leader's ability to serve as a role model through personal integrity, values, and behaviors that inspire respect and trust among employees. Such a leader "practices what they preach" and inspires others to strive toward shared goals through their charismatic presence [13]. One of the leaders stated that it is important to be perceived as someone who builds trust and aligns words with actions, emphasizing the importance of making the vision come alive in practice: "As a leader, you really must walk the talk. You can't just say, yes, yes, yes, we have this in our vision... but how do we go about defining it?" This reveals an awareness of how a leader's personal values and demeanor affect the organizational culture, and the informant uses their experience to foster an inclusive climate where colleagues feel safe with them as a leader. Over time, a kind of psychological contract may form between such leaders and employees [8], where staff come to know what is expected of them and how to interact in the workplace.

Leaders who build trust by meeting expectations through consistent words and actions can reinforce the informal psychological contract between leadership and staff. These contracts can be understood as informal, unwritten expressions of "this is how we do things here." If employees perceive that this contract is broken, it can lead to a loss of trust and security, which may affect the workplace culture. Organizations that are given the opportunity to develop openness and two-way communication about challenges and tasks are more likely to foster mutual trust between leadership and staff [9].

Another informant pointed out that they are more concerned with the systematic aspects of charisma and influence. They emphasized that influence is not limited to the leader's role but can also be exercised by colleagues, stating: "Sometimes it's not the principal who has the most influence... sometimes it's a colleague." This implies that the leader is capable of mastering both content and process together with employees [5]. It's about being able to lead and listen equally. This reflects a more decentralized understanding of leadership where influence is built collectively, not just personally. Leaders who fail to listen to their employees may eventually find themselves unheard. Employees subjected to such leadership may become indifferent and disillusioned.

In this study, we see that leaders devote great attention to their employees by being engaged in the process, leading, and listening. In this way, we can observe elements of transformational leadership in how employees contribute to co-creation and organizational development [1][9]. The leaders appear credible and respected, demonstrating either person-focused and relational charisma or, at the other end, structural and value-based distributed leadership [22]. This highlights the importance of leaders mastering the balance between a sufficient amount of transactional leadership to ensure structures

and goals, and transformational leadership that fosters co-creation, engagement, internal motivation, and organizational development in the professional community [9]. Robinson [16] argues that successful school leaders set clear goals and are actively involved in their professional communities. The informants expressed that a sense of community develops when leaders are active and set clear expectations for all staff to work toward shared goals.

6. Inspiration

Inspirational leaders can articulate a clear and motivating vision and create enthusiasm and meaning in their work. They help employees identify with goals and feel that they are contributing to something larger than themselves. One of the leaders explains why they place great emphasis on vision and collective ownership: "Getting people on board is about creating a climate and culture where everyone feels they are part of the solution." In many ways, it is about developing cultures of collaboration and responsibility, as seen in transformative leadership theories. These are important elements for creating coherence and consistency in the leadership of development efforts [6]. It is therefore important that leaders can inspire and guide in such a way that everyone feels both responsible and committed, while also experiencing that they are part of the solution to a successful change or development process.

The informants also actively use their own personalities as sources of inspiration, an inclusive style that engages colleagues and fosters inspiration and enthusiasm. The informants noted that creating a positive learning environment also involves leadership that models desired behavior, maintains close relationships with staff, and shows commitment to development work. This aligns with Jakobsen's research on optimization and willingness to contribute [8]. Within the professional learning community, leaders should highlight values and inspiration to foster collaboration and mutual effort toward shared goals.

Vision can also be communicated through symbols and metaphors to create shared understanding [10]. One of the leaders expressed it this way: "You need rain to see the rainbow." They demonstrate how a simple metaphor for growth can inspire both staff and students, especially during challenging times like the pandemic. Inspiration can occur through relationships and community or by using visual tools such as metaphors that appeal to values and emotions. By establishing such arenas where individuals and groups experience a sense of mastery, transformational leadership can help build collective capacity [17]. This helps make visions meaningful and relevant. We see that using both transformational and transactional leadership strengthens the capacity to manage desired change and development in schools [9].

7. Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation involves the leader challenging employees to think differently, question established practices and develop creative solutions. It presumes a belief that everyone has the ability and willingness to learn and improve. One school leader explained that they encourage their staff to think critically and creatively, and to embrace innovation: "Please, think outside the box... it's about language, it's about dialogue, it's about empowering people." As discussed by Roland [17], this highlights the importance of developing the capacity for critical thinking and reflection to mobilize staff within the professional community. It may require leaders to relinquish control to allow processes to feel open and trustworthy, with minimal risk for participants. This became especially clear during the pandemic, when leaders had to enable their colleagues to explore and try new solutions such as digital teaching formats and online student events. Mintzberg's leadership theories [12] also address experiential learning, emphasizing the opportunity to explore and test new solutions. Mintzberg stresses that leadership occurs at the intersection of art, craft, and science, and that it is about finding the right balance between control and creativity. The informants described the pandemic period as particularly challenging, but also as a time that presented greater opportunities for new solutions.

Case studies were also highlighted as a key method by one of the informants, who stated: "We divide into groups and work through different cases... to develop professional flexibility and adaptability." Here, reflection and systematic analysis are emphasized as important tools for developing professional judgment and decisiveness. This is a form of leadership that can elevate employees while also ensuring process and progress. Positive leadership that draws on the framework of transformational leadership can achieve engaged employees who work intensively with analysis and reflection on important challenges in schools [1]. At the same time, this underscores the importance of participation, trust, and co-creation in the professional community [18].

8. Individualized Consideration

Individualized consideration is about recognizing and supporting each employee, acknowledging their unique needs and potential. The leader acts as a mentor and guide, creating an environment where everyone feels valued. One school leader expressed the need to be clear, available, and supportive of individuals in their development: "Let me find a colleague for you... be available at all times." This shows how trust and support must align with the demands and expectations the leader has given, according to the employee's current situation [6][8].

During the pandemic, it was especially important for leaders to adopt an active presence by following up with their employees both professionally and emotionally. One of the informants also organized creative well-being initiatives, such as sending surprise packages to staff during lockdown. Bolman et.al. [2] also emphasized the importance of individual rewards and personalized attention. Celebrating small victories can be motivating and lower the threshold for development. The school leaders in the study were conscious of creating a sense of safety and support through low threshold contact and a collegial approach. Transformational leadership is about seeing everyone, but with varying degrees of personal involvement.

The ability to use digital tools and platforms was described by the informants as essential competence, especially during Covid-19. This also involves leadership that can effectively leverage digital technologies to meet individual employees' needs while maintaining and developing collaboration through digital platforms. Hargreaves & O´Connor [7] also emphasize this point, noting that it is possible to adapt the leadership role to changing circumstances and ensure continuous learning within the professional community.

9. Summary

This study examines the experiences of school leaders in the Ontario region of Canada in developing leadership strategies at their schools, with particular emphasis on transformational leadership as the theoretical framework. Through qualitative interviews with four experienced school leaders, the study reveals how transformational leadership with its four core components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration is central to fostering development and engagement in schools.

The leaders emphasize the importance of being role models by "practicing what they preach" and building trust through consistency between words and actions. A strong awareness of how personal integrity and values influence school culture is a consistent theme in the thinking of Ontario's school leaders. At the same time, influence is shown not to be exercised solely by principals, but also by colleagues, underscoring a decentralized and relationship-oriented approach to leadership. A shared vision and collective ownership are highlighted as key factors for creating a culture of responsibility, where all staff feel that they are contributing to a common solution. Collective awareness and capacity are major driving forces in changing processes within Ontario's schools [14].

The school leaders also emphasize intellectual stimulation by encouraging staff to think critically and creatively and by allowing room for innovation, including through case studies and reflection activities. This contributes to professional growth and the development of action competence. During the pandemic, the leaders demonstrated a high capacity for adaptability, including the use of digital tools to support both learning and relationship building. Individualized consideration is another important aspect, where leaders are closely engaged with their staff and tailor support and guidance to individual needs. This is about seeing the whole person both professionally and emotionally and creating a safe and supportive work environment. The leader thus acts as a mentor who contributes to well-being and professional development.

In conclusion, the study shows that the leaders can balance transactional leadership with clear goals, structure, and accountability with transformational leadership, which promotes internal motivation, community, and innovation. This balance is essential for sustainable organizational development. The school leaders' experiences underscore the importance of trust-based leadership and professional learning communities in strengthening the school's capacity for improvement and adaptation in the face of new challenges.

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