



Distributing Leadership and Boosting Organizational Change: An Action Research

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to investigate the effect of distributed leadership practice on initiating and sustaining a successful and effective organizational change process within a small-sized higher education unit. The study was designed as an action research and followed a 16-week action plan to initiate a change plan. The study group consists of 18 full-time instructors, a department head and a program coordinator (it includes all the staff, sampling not required) who are all, in the broader sense, responsible for teaching English to young adult learners, preparing the curriculum and materials in the Department of Foreign Languages of the higher education institution during the first half of the academic year 2011-2012. For the study, data-collection methods were observation by the researcher – at the same time, program coordinator- and two focus-group interviews with instructors, also held by the researcher. The findings indicate that distributing leadership enhances the organizational change experience, contributes to cooperation and collaboration among staff and leads to a true change process. As a useful alternative to top-down, enforced change attempts and individual leadership practices, distributed leadership practice motivates the staff to be actively involved in organizational change experience and improves the quality of organizational experience in addition to boosting cooperation and collaboration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In many cases, most school organizations, if given the opportunity, prefer the status quo despite both internal and external forces that require and instinctively stimulate change. The reason for such a preference is quite obvious: Stability and routine activities are more predictable and often associated with a higher level of efficiency, at least from the viewpoint of organizational administration. This being the case, however, the schools are not static and are actually destined to change due to certain internal and external forces including technology adaptation, new governmental laws and regulations, administrative processes and underlying problems that hinder competition and effectiveness.

No matter how painful the change process may be, organizational change, with its broad definition, the movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase effectiveness [1], is often perceived as necessity. It is even argued that in such a social setting, to change plays the pivotal role in the existence of any organization [2].

Change in education or educational change is defined differently in the literature. While change is defined as the product of the intention to integrate technology into education and a transformation process from the conventional to a new form [3], other authors takes a more holistic approach to change in education and considers it as restructuring culture and values prevalent in the education system [4]. Similarly, it is also claimed that true organizational change is quite comprehensive [5]. The authors use the analogy 'the iceberg phenomenon' to emphasize the challenge of a true change. While the tip of the iceberg represents elements that are observable, rational and visible (including span of control, daily operations, procedures and practices etc.), the deeper and covert part of it is associated with affective, social and psychological characteristics – values, emotions, interpersonal relationships etc.- which are indeed the crucial dynamics for the success of systemic change. Based on such an analogy, it is essential that the change happens in the deeper part of an organization.

Educational change being the focus in the study, the ultimate question is how to achieve such a large-scale, deep and systemic shift that makes

use of the whole organizational potential and leadership structure. Often, change in general and educational change is closely connected with leadership practices. The fairy tale is well-known: The leader gets out of the egg with heroic features, initiates the change and drives the organization to the intended destination. However, in contemporary educational systems, school change cannot only be related to leader's skills, capabilities and intentions as such a way of thinking underestimates the risk factors apparent and fails to benefit from collective decision-making and responsibility, staff potential and expertise, informal interpersonal relationships and organizational creativity opportunities.

In a fast and ever-changing world, even in a small-scale school, school leadership is already too demanding and necessitates more than one expertise due to the diversity and complexity of daily tasks. Initiating and sustaining a true and successful change by only trusting a single leader, in many contexts, is not applicable considering the organizational leadership potential and staff contribution to the process. Distributing leadership and adopting a distributed leadership practice, in that sense, can provide the school organization with necessary collective potential. Distributed leadership practice, with its basic definition, defines leadership as a collective structure that shares the leadership roles and responsibilities based on staff expertise, interest and skills instead of a hierarchical, focused, formal and personal leadership model [6]. In other words, distributed leadership moves away from an individual and role-based perspective to a practice that focuses on the organization and leadership tasks [7]. In a distributed model of leadership, there are two main inferences: it allows for a democratic process that allows collaboration and participation in decision making and it expands the administrative mechanism of schools and provides more authority to other staff, namely teachers [8]. Decentralized and participative leadership -giving teachers the responsibility for change and school improvement and stimulating active involvement and collaboration rather than a top-down delegation- is effective [9]. Distributed leadership, in this regard, is a model in which the staff work together to develop a vision and strategy for the organization [10].

The school leadership literature has already been marked with authors that have sought to

understand the relationship between school improvement and change and leadership practices [11]. Although the distributed approach of leadership is relatively new, deeper insight into its application in different organizations and ties with other organizational concepts -in this study organizational change and improvement- can provide us with elaborated data to benefit from for staff development, sustainable change patterns and school improvement. Therefore, there is a need to research how organizational change process is responding to a distributed leadership approach.

The main purpose of the study is to understand the process in which organizational change for a more effective structure is initiated and happens when leadership is distributed among the staff. In addition to this primary intention, the study tries to answer the research questions below:

- In what way does a distributed leadership practice affect organizational change process?
- How is distributed leadership practices related to school and staff development?
- How is leadership distributed for a sustainable and effective organizational change and improvement?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study has been designed as an action research. Action research can be defined as a participatory, democratic process which combines action (change, improvement) and research (understanding and knowledge) to develop practice or bring solutions to an existing problem situation [12]. The following definition of action research is especially useful to understand the process of the present study: It is *"a form of social practice which integrates both the production and use of knowledge for the purpose of promoting learning with and among individuals and systems whose work is characterized by uniqueness, uncertainty and instability"* [13].

The study originated from both a collective endeavor to restructure the organization, distribution of tasks, staff development, curriculum development, student learning process planning and technology integration in order to respond to the demands of the institution and bring solutions to pre-existing organizational problems and an individual curiosity which is more related to distribution of leadership. The author, also the program coordinator in the

organization, realizing the collective need for change and potential benefits of following a distributed approach to leadership used action research method to reflect upon the process.

2.1 Study Subject

The study group consists of 18 full-time instructors, a department head and a program coordinator (it includes all the staff, sampling not required) who are all, in the broader sense, responsible for teaching English to young adult learners, preparing the curriculum and materials in the Department of Foreign Languages of a higher education institution during the first half of the academic year 2011-2012.

The department head is the official and formal administrator of the Department. The program coordinator is elected by the instructors and is given the authority to manage the program, staff and organization by the Department Head. The formal top-down hierarchy follows the order: department head, coordinator and instructors. Detailed information about the study group is shown in Table 1. The table includes the gender, age, service time in teaching profession and the last obtained degree which is also an indicator of expertise in certain areas.

2.2 Instruments

For the study, data-collection methods were observation by the researcher – at the same time, program coordinator- and focus-group interviews with instructors, also held by the researcher. Based on a pre-determined research plan, both of these methods were used together both to enrich the data and to increase the validity and reliability. Before the action plan, the researcher observed the existing organization structure and problem areas and compared the data with a focus group interview performed with the instructors. In this first interview, the details of action plan were decided collaboratively. During the plan, researcher continued to observe the change simultaneously. Following the first action plan, observations and a second focus group interview were done to reflect on the new situation. The questions for all interviews were semi-structured to allow for additional and rich data collection for the transformation process. Upon designing the interview questions, three different expert opinions were taken to re-shape the questions in a way to enhance reliability and validity. The researcher systematically noted the observations daily in order not to overlook any

crucial data and categorized the data for each problem area. All interviews were voice recorded and indited and transcripts were given to instructors for re-check.

Table 1, as stated earlier, provides basic demographic and academic information about the study group.

2.3 Study Process

The action research took 16 weeks and consists of three main stages:

1. Pre-mobilization stage: detecting problem areas, leadership distribution, collaborative formation of action plan (2 weeks)
2. Action Stage: implementation of action plan, active leadership commissions (12 weeks)
3. Post-action and evaluation stage: evaluation of organizational change, collaborative end-of-plan meeting, restructuring of the process and action plan for further development (2 weeks).

The pre-mobilization stage started with identifying the problem areas that hindered the effectiveness of organizational practices. The researcher and staff were already familiar with certain problems. Still, for a more systemic and

scientific flow of plan, initial observations and the first focus group interview was held. Based on these, five distinct problem areas were identified:

- Individual leadership practices
- Uncertainty in distribution of responsibilities:
- Failure in collective decision-making processes
- Limited Research and Development Opportunities
- Lack of professional cooperation among staff

Based on the findings, a set of solutions were also decided collectively. However, what was more important in this stage was the distribution of leadership. Following a comprehensive investigation of distributed leadership literature and brainstorming during the interview, the leadership practices were categorized into five different commissions (leadership teams) each of which was formed based on workload, expertise and interest. Distributing leadership within an organization may follow different patterns ranging from spontaneous collaboration and instinctive professional relationships to institutionalized practices and planned grouping [14]. While spontaneous leadership teams collaborate for a single task and a limited duration,

Table 1. Study subject profile

Coding ("I" stands for instructor)	Gender	Age	Service time in teaching (Year)	Terminal degree
I1	M	27	3	Bachelor's Degree
I2	M	27	3	Bachelor's Degree
I3	M	28	2	Bachelor's Degree
I4	F	37	9	Master's Degree
I5	M	39	8	Master's Degree
I6	F	25	2	Bachelor's Degree
I7	F	29	1	Bachelor's Degree
I8	M	28	3	Master's Degree
I9	M	26	3	Bachelor's Degree
I10	F	33	5	Bachelor's Degree
I11	M	43	10	Bachelor's Degree
I12	F	33	7	Master's Degree
I13	F	27	3	Bachelor's Degree
I14	F	27	3	Bachelor's Degree
I15	F	27	4	Bachelor's Degree
I16	M	32	8	Bachelor's Degree
I17	F	32	5	Bachelor's Degree
I18	F	38	14	Master's Degree
I19 (Program coordinator)	M	28	4	Master's Degree

institutionalized practices refer to planned, normative and systemic leadership teams. For a sustainable leadership distribution and organizational change process, the leadership was distributed according to the latter as follows:

- Material and Curriculum Development Commission (MCDC)
- Commission of Student Affairs (CSA)
- Commission of Professional Development (CPD)
- Commission of Educational Technology & Communication (CETC)
- Coordination Commission (CC)

The formation of these commissions or leadership teams was carefully planned in order not to perform as units of a top-down delegation. Instead, each commission was formed based on expertise in the field, staff interest and workload. From the beginning, the commissions were made sure that they would have the authorization, accountability and freedom for what they would try to do. Showing his support during the process, the department head functioned more as a buffer to prevent the negative effects of top-down hierarchy and bureaucracy from university management and other external forces. The program coordinator and at the same time the active researcher, following his being appointed to the post, showed willingness to share leadership authority and responsibilities to initiate a distributed leadership practice, which was the key aspect to embrace a new type of leadership that is not based on individual properties and heroic tales.

Completing the first stage successfully, each commission began to actively operate within the boundaries of their assigned positions. Based on the initial problems detected and their individual strategies, they decided on a set of solutions and put their strategies into action. During a 10-week timeline, the staff generated a great many alternatives to the traditional functioning of the organization. The process was actively observed by the researcher simultaneously.

In addition to initial findings during the process, the researcher made other observations following the action stage period in order to understand the effects of leadership distribution on the organizational change. These were followed by an end-of-plan meeting – indeed a second focus group interview- to evaluate the process and learn about the staff's opinion.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

As stated previously, the data collection tools for the study were observation (before, during and after the action plan) and two focus group interviews conducted with the attendance of the staff. Based on the findings of observations and transcribed interviews the findings were analyzed via descriptive analysis method and presented below with quotations where necessary.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study were represented under three main subheadings:

- Pre-mobilization stage
- Action stage
- Post-action and evaluation stage

3.1 Pre-mobilization Stage

The observations and initial focus group interview conducted in this stage were focused on pre-existing problems available within the organization and transition to a distributed model of leadership. When the data obtained from observations and interviews were combined, the problems were grouped under five distinct categories:

Individual leadership practices refer to a focused and individual leadership attitude which often fails to utilize organizational leadership potential and contribution by the staff. The observations revealed that the previous program coordinator, despite acting in good faith, hesitated to give others responsibility mostly fearing accountability issues and disrupting top-down hierarchical structure.

Uncertainty in distribution of responsibilities was the greatest source of confusion and malfunctioning of the organization. Without proper job definitions, the staff members, even though they showed willingness, failed to take responsibility and action.

I know for sure there are a great many tasks to do but personally, I am not able to take action without actually knowing the details. Teaching is not just a job for many; it is also a source of pleasure, which unfortunately I am not having for now. (14)

At the end of the term, I was told to prepare mid-term exams, which was not a problem till I learnt

that I had only 24 hours to do it. How is anyone supposed to do it? (17)

I have no idea about who is doing what in the department. We are either multi-tasking and suffering from heavy workload or doing nothing except for active teaching. (11)

I have good computer skills yet I haven't been able to use them for the organization. (12)

There are individual endeavors yet without a systemic approach, all are in futile. (111)

When the instructors' statements were analyzed, the problems were apparent: Although there were individual attempts and efforts, lack of job definitions hindered a cooperative and collective action plan. This led to a failure in utilizing the staff potential.

Failure in collective decision-making processes substitutes for a lack of mechanisms that will enable decision-making collectively.

I believe this is not a democratic platform and who is responsible for this is not one of us. The real problem is we don't have means to do so. No regular meetings, no surveys and almost no communication among us. (16)

I don't feel like my ideas are valued here. (14)

Planning the process collectively has a great potential and all of us are aware of this reality. Yet, we are not doing it. (118)

Not being able to participate in decision-making process was more related to lack of regular means to do so. This led to disappointment by the staff.

Limited Research and Development Opportunities stands for the failure to initiate a change for the better functioning of the organization. This problem area is more related to curriculum and material development, technology integration and professional development opportunities.

We are unable to update our materials and exams what we have are all old-fashioned ones. We have to revise them.... The easiest way might be to keep them as they are but it is not definitely the best. (14)

Teaching English is changing all over the world. The leading schools are integrating technology

into the curriculum. We, on the other hand, are falling behind. (16)

It is not destined to be like this. Failure to change is our problem. Despite everything, we can manage to enhance. (19)

The last time we held an in-service education was five years ago. We are just underestimating the value of professional development. (118)

The exams we deliver are totally out-of-fashion. Our graduates need international certificates. Our failure to provide them with necessary skills will be definitely a problem for all of us. (15)

We are a small-sized unit and we should use it as an advantage. I believe everyone here will contribute as long as we have a system to organize the tasks. (111)

As academic staff, we are among the leading ones as most of us are graduates from top universities and are still going on their education. We need to make use of this potential. (17)

When the statements were taken into consideration, the problem area -mainly related to teaching experience including material development and curriculum design- was marked with dissatisfaction. Although the staff was aware of the potential, they hadn't been able to take action to eradicate these educational problems and failed to offer quality language education.

Lack of professional cooperation among staff is mostly related to lack of an organization structure that boosts cooperation and collaboration among instructors. Observations revealed that there is a growing schism within the organization.

Cooperation is just a myth here. I have no idea about what others are doing. (11)

We need a schedule that allows for different teaching partners boosting interaction among us will help us benefit from our experiences. (12)

Small teams may be the solution. People who have common interests and expertise fields can work together. At least, I would enjoy doing so. (112)

We have valuable ideas ... can easily realize our dreams through cooperation. (115)

3.2 Action Stage

Following this initial observation and interview findings, the action stage began. The most

important findings of simultaneous observations were itemized below:

- MCDC updated the whole curriculum and exams in a way that they would be compatible with internationally accepted ones. It also got in touch with leading publishers to access to their resources and materials. The commission also established a Testing and Material Office to make things institutionalized. Furthermore, they re-arranged the schedule for each class so that different instructors would have the chance to collaborate with each other. In other words, for each class, three different instructors had the teaching responsibility and the curriculum necessitated active interaction for student learning process.
- CSA initially dealt with attendance reports and student organizations and realizing the need for a more systemic student management system, it searched for such databases and discovered a system called ENGRADE and immediately established the system. By doing this, it solved a deep-seated problem as both the department and students had been having great trouble following the attendance data and grade details.
- CPD, consisting of two instructors who were also attending master programs in related fields, investigated scientific journals and other innovations and trends in the field of language teaching and shared them with the staff. They also began to prepare a weekly bulletin board for the students in order to contribute to their learning process.
- CETC, consisting of staff members with good computer skills and interest in technology integration into curriculum, brought two major innovations in this 10-week timeline. First, they activated online language practice platforms which comes free with course books but had never been utilized before, to enhance and track student learning. They prepared guidelines for students to introduce the system and held in-service education to teach the staff how to use necessary tools. The commission also re-designed the department website and began to use it actively to keep the students and others informed about recent news.
- CC consisted of program coordinator and assistant coordinators. Before the action

plan, there weren't any assistants, which alone hindered utilization of leadership potential. Thus, the coordinator and two assistants (one of them was permanently assigned to keep daily tasks and routines going while the other assistant was temporarily assigned from those who showed willingness. The reason for such a circulation is to benefit from leadership development opportunities within the organization.) was occupied with daily administrative tasks, coordination of commissions, long-term strategy planning in cooperation with other staff and flow of communication within the department. As well as such primary functions, CC also initiated a number of secondary measures to support the change process. Realizing the need for instant and effective means of communication among commissions and staff members, it created a number of communication tools including group pages, file-sharing systems and a forum as well as organizing mini end-of-lesson meetings to inform the staff about the works of each commission and reflect upon the process.

3.3 Post-action and Evaluation Stage

In the final stage of the study, a second focus group interview was conducted as well as a two-week additional observation period. The observations indicated that distributing leadership and creating planned and systemic teams facilitated the change process and brought solutions to existing problem areas. The department head supported the transformation process and the program coordinator showed willingness to enforce a top-down hierarchy and showed willingness to distribute leadership. Instead of using formal power to complete a certain mission, the coordination commission focused more on cooperation opportunities and tried to keep the change process smooth. Other findings are listed below:

- Diverse means of communication positively affected collective decision making.
- The commissions actively involved in what they do and brought effective solutions to the problems detected earlier.
- The new curriculum and schedule was effective in preventing schism. Professional cooperation among the commissions and staff increased dramatically.

- The staff made use of articles and other materials shared for professional development.
- The multiple structure of CC allowed the development of leadership potential.
- The change process was smooth and trouble-free and took less time to complete.
- Technology integration was successful. The new attendance and grading system was welcome.
- All instructors showed satisfaction about the new state.
- Both the students and university management also realized the change and stated their contentment.
- The staff showed willingness to further improve the plan.

The second focus group interview findings were also in line with these findings:

During the plan, we resolved our deep-seated problems. We definitely updated our whole system. I believe the language education we have here is now more qualified. (13)

Interaction among us is now more intense Personally, I had the chance to work with other instructors and it was definitely an opportunity to learn more about their experiences.

Articles were great for me. I had the chance to refresh my knowledge in the field. (19)

Instead of hierarchy, sharing responsibility via commissions was really useful. As a member of CC, I had the chance to observe administrative routines. (15)

No matter who is talking, we listened to them, discussed the opinions and I believe we found a common ground. (19)

I always had the fear to use technology in the class. Thanks to in-service education, I experienced no difficulty. (19)

What we have done here is more than the total of individual efforts. Commissions were always active. It would have been a painful process considering the teaching duties if it had been enforced. (110)

3.3.1 Final outcomes

The findings of the study indicate that a distributed leadership practice facilitates the change process enabling cooperation, collaboration and interaction within the

leadership teams and among the whole staff. The department, which was marked with organizational problems that hindered the proper functioning of the daily routines and initiation of an organizational change process, was restructured during a 16-week action plan. The significance of the study comes from the fact it was designed as an action plan which made use of the collective leadership potential of the staff through leadership teams to initiate and sustain a real change process. Even in a formal hierarchical organization, distributing leadership is proved to be effective as long as it is done in an institutionalized manner which allows creativity and freedom within leadership teams which are formed on the basis of staff expertise and interest and also potential workload. Designing the whole process as an action research that helped the practitioners to reflect upon their own practices was another strength of the current study. Each commission, when given the support, freedom, responsibility and accountability for their own actions, worked smoothly and effectively to bring creative solutions detected by the staff. The present study is especially important in proving that leadership distribution is possible even in hierarchical structures and contributes to change process and even accelerates it as long as it includes the target population actively.

The general picture being positive, the formation and full-functioning of leadership teams may take time [15] and if the organizational structure is not appropriate for such a big change process, individual and collective leadership models can be combined, which is often referred as hybrid leadership [16]. For the present organization, this wasn't the case as distributing leadership was indeed the outcome of the intention and willingness of the program coordinator. As the distribution and change process was trouble-free, it wasn't necessary to refer to any kind of enforcement and formal power.

4. CONCLUSION

Consequently, change can be a really challenge and is often associated with internal resistance when it is enforced and initiated through a top-down structure. Distributing leadership, in that sense, can be a great opportunity to start an organizational change process and boost staff involvement. Based on the organizational structure and culture, different forms of leadership distribution can be utilized. The study, designed as an action research, indicated that adopting a distributed leadership model

contributed a lot to initiate and sustain a successful organizational change process. Instead of traditional, hierarchical and enforced intention for the change, a distributed perspective increased collaboration, communication and interaction among the staff. Leadership teams - formed on the basis of expertise, interest and workload- accelerated the transformation process within the organization. These teams must not function as means of delegation. Instead, they should be given freedom, responsibility and accountability for their actions in order to maximize the potential creativity and staff involvement.

Each organization possesses a unique culture in which artefacts, missions, espoused values and underlying assumptions are shared among the staff in time. Change, in this sense, is bound to be in relation to the cultural context. Indeed, what often makes top-down change initiatives ineffective or too risky for the future of the organization is the failure to understand the culture-specific issues within the organization. Similarly, how and to what extent leadership is distributed is also dependent on these issues. It is indicated in the study that leadership distribution during the change process has positive outcomes for this organization. However, for other organizations, both researchers and practitioners must be aware of all other cultural variables and plan each step carefully.

Despite these concerns, the study proves that it is possible to implement an alternate model of leadership that focuses more on collaboration, lateral relationships, staff involvement and leadership development even within a formal hierarchical structure. The outcomes of the current study imply that formal, heroic and individualistic models of leadership are not the only options for the survival of any organization. Distributing leadership and initiating change, in line with corporate culture, can be experimented in different settings to further contribute to the existing leadership literature. To what extent leadership can be distributed in unique settings (ex: a competitive school environment, in a large-scale educational setting) may provide educators and administrators with further insight into the potential opportunities that they can utilize to adapt the change.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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