

The Consultancy Protocol: Future School Leaders Engage in Collaborative Inquiry

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Abstract

Decision-making is key to being an effective administrator. The saying, “You are only as good as your last shot,” sometimes applies to the way principals feel when a new plan that addresses a problem is met with opposition from disapproving faculty, staff, parents, or students. Experienced school principals learned early in their career that asking the right questions underscores the search for the best solution to the problem. In framing and reframing the issue through comprehensive query and gathering input from others, it is more likely that the school leader will seek all the relevant data and then be able to formulate, weigh, and determine a plan of action that will engender support. This brief discusses the use of a collaborative role-playing format based on consultancy protocol to develop aspiring school leaders’ skill at in-depth problem-solving and enhance the quality of their decisions through peer input.

Introduction

One of the most difficult issues I faced as a novice elementary principal was the emotionally and politically charged closing of my building. It was easy to be consumed by the despair of the school community. In retrospect, my initial missteps that caused a decline in student and staff motivation as well as some repercussions from the central office were created by my not having all the facts and selecting a course of action solely riveted on saving the building. Rather than grasping the full extent of the problem which extended beyond the loss of our school, I needed to raise more questions directed not only to the members of my immediate school community, but also to other stakeholders in the district as well as colleagues from other districts in order to understand the arduous and heart wrenching process of redistricting. In time I better understood that my first responsibility was not to fuel the opposition which continued the struggle for the school’s survival, but to ensure that teaching and learning remained in focus during the two turbulent years prior to the final decision to close the school.

As I began to revise my frame with assistance from the faculty, parents, and administrative colleagues which led to a burst of positive energy and recommitment to our mission, the pervasive high anxiety, hopelessness, and lack of motivation in the school significantly diminished. I can now say that some of my most exhilarating times as an educator occurred during this period. After a bumpy start and with a clearer picture of the real possibility that this may be the last reminiscences of this once joyous and productive school setting, the faculty, parents, and I set out to craft as many stimulating and challenging learning experiences as we could hoping to provide everlasting memories for the children as well as the adults. Evening science and social studies fairs, a reading club that engaged all of the 350 students and a Grandparents' Day replete with original poetry, songs, and plays became the school's legacy. Twenty years later, as a professor of educational leadership, I was reminded of these years when one of my graduate students excitedly told the class about her elementary school experiences and then surprised me when she said, "And you were my principal."

Becoming a School Leader: A Balance of Theory and Practice

Transitioning from teacher to school leader can be thorny with decision-making being at the forefront of an aspirant's angst. In the Core I course which I teach, three interrelated areas, human relations, leadership, and school community relations, are presented with a balanced viewpoint of theory and practice through analysis of current issues in administration. This course is designed to enable students to:

1. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of administrative theory, organizational culture, and educational leadership and make connections between theory and practice.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of schools as social systems and the impact of historic and current developments on organizational change.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think systematically and critically about school leadership and understand and present multiple solutions to educational leadership issues.
4. Enhance leadership skills in communication, teambuilding, and decision-making.
5. Develop an awareness of one's personal leadership style(s), identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement.
6. Articulate a vision for schools and in the process become more conscious of one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions about the purposes of education.

Theoretical study including models of decision-making as well as administrative processes which promote positive organizational culture, effective communication, motivated faculty and staff, and openness to organizational change provides the foundation for practical exercises such as fieldwork experiences, case studies, role-plays, and simulations. Through these activities students are able to learn the science and art of leadership in a risk-free

environment. Decision-making with an emphasis on understanding issues from multiple perspectives, generating and evaluating alternative solutions, and choosing a beneficial course of action are developed in my leadership classroom through problems of practice underscored by a theoretical base.

In general, the participative process tends to improve the quality, creativity, acceptance, understanding, judgment, and accuracy of decisions (DuBrin, 2002). With this orientation, one of the activities which I use to assist aspiring school leaders in learning the classical decision-making model, in conjunction with a student's self-selected real-life case study, is a modification of the consultancy protocol. The protocol was initially designed for critical discussion of a lesson plan, unit, or classroom issue by the Coalition of Essential School's Program and further adapted and revised as part of an Annenberg Institute Project to provide a structure for teachers to scrutinize a professional issue and gain insights from peers in a conversation designed to further illuminate the subject. In this "administrative" consultancy protocol, the emphasis is also on query development to acquire increased knowledge and information about the school problem and create a greater number of solutions as well as evaluate the alternatives through planned interaction with colleagues.

Understanding the Consultancy Protocol

The purpose of the consultancy protocol is to assist an individual to think through an issue. Its primary function is to define and position the problem in a "descriptive rather than judgmental" fashion with the concern for the person who is consulting rather than on the individual experiences of the consultancy group members (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). Critical Friends Group was established by three professional developers from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. It was designed as a program using protocols to train coaches to create a collegial culture within their teaching groups focused on improvement of student learning through the examination of student work or observation of each other (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000).

The protocol provides helpful parameters that "ease the anxieties of revealing the heart of one's practice to colleagues" (Cushman, 1999). In its purest form, the protocol structures the time, behavior, and discussion format of the consultancy session to ensure maximum time on task, support learning, and facilitate positive group dynamics. Depending on the topic of discussion, consultancy groups may meet from 40 minutes to two hours and include a designated timeframe for each step of the process. Within this period, the participants move through the protocol stages to uncover and more closely examine the layers of the issue. In 10 blocks of time lasting 20 minutes each, the group proceeds to address specific tasks such as the ones listed below.

- Present the problem
- Raise clarifying questions
- Pose probing questions

- Offer suggestions
- Engage in discussion
- Debrief the process

Implementing Consultancy Protocol in the Leadership Classroom

In the course syllabus the consultancy protocol is described as a brief oral presentation in which the student assumes the role of an administrator who is presenting a case study to a small group of administrative colleagues who will help the presenter to clarify the issue by asking probing questions, expand thinking about the problem, and further analyze the dilemma. Solutions may be discussed since this outside perspective should assist the presenter in determining the most appropriate resolution to this issue.

Preparing for the Consultancy Protocol

Prior to the consultancy protocol, each student outlines a dilemma or a set of complex issues around a change or school reform observed and personally or professionally involved in. Assurances for anonymity are maintained by changing names and any other identifiable information. The student gathers data through review of public records and reports as well as interviewing school community members or conducting brief surveys. In addition, the student postulates possible solutions to the problem by researching current practice through viewing resources that are directly related to the issues presented in the case. As a student prepares for the individual consultancy, the student assembles the following information.

- Profile of the school district or school—demographics (i.e., location, student population, staff profile, socio-economic background)
- The players--administrative organization— centralized, decentralized, different positions, formal and informal chain of command
- Philosophy—vision, mission, goals, procedures as related to this case
- Background of the situation—origin, history
- Description of the situation and problem and relevant data and research

Engaging in the Process

The consultancy protocol group consists of six participants. When the session begins each student assumes the role of an administrator and puts on the self-selected “administrator’s hat.” The students choose a particular administrative role based on a prior assignment in which they conduct an in-depth interview of a practicing administrator in a position to which they aspire. From this personal interchange, they begin to grasp some of the issues as well as concerns that school leaders need to consider in their decision-making process. The students are given a 40-minute period to present their case, ask for clarifying and provocative questions, and generate discussion. There is a suggested time frame for each

segment of the consultancy protocol; however, since another goal for these aspirants is to learn to facilitate group discussion, the presenter as the facilitator of the protocol is allowed some leeway in adjusting the timeslots with the understanding that the objective is to maximize the assistance they receive from engaging their “administrative” colleagues in this collaborative inquiry method.

Reflecting on the Process

The debriefing, or reflective component of the consultancy protocol, is completed after the students conclude their discussion. Two forms, one for the presenter and another for the other group participants, are distributed. Within a 10-minute period students are required to complete these reflection sheets either from the perspective of the presenter or from the “administrative” consultant’s depending on the role they played during the specific protocol. The presenter is asked to respond to the questions noted below.

- What issues and questions were raised that you didn’t think of?
- How has the consultancy discussion altered or solidified your thinking about a course of action to resolve your problem?

In addition the presenter is encouraged to comment on the process and the individual’s delivery of the information as well as the ability to facilitate a focused, meaningful discussion. The other participants (administrative consultants) note the underlying theories that can inform the resolution to this problem, indicate the clarifying and thought-provoking questions, write their reflections about the process, and comment on their contributions in assisting the presenter in the decision-making process.

Solidifying the Decision

The forms completed by the “administrative” consultants are given to the presenter for review and reflection of the session. All the reflection responses are attached to the finalized written case study submitted to me the following week. This written document is presented in the form of a memo in which the student in the role of administrator reports to a supervisor. With the added perspective gained through the consultancy protocol, in this document, the student describes the situation, discusses the various resolution possibilities with supportive data and research, and recommends a course of action with justification. In addition to the memo, students attach a one-page brief presenting the underlying theories that serve as the foundation for this decision.

Gaining an Administrative Perspective

In review of the students’ evaluations of their own performance as a facilitator as well as an “administrative” colleague, many recorded their delight in stepping into the administrative role and viewing issues with new lenses. On the other hand, students commented that they needed to remind themselves to think about all

school community stakeholders and the questions that they may pose in the decision-making process. The opportunity to work on a relevant problem which required them to think differently and listen to others' viewpoints allowed them to experience in some measure the world of a school leader. The additional practice in presentation delivery also promoted confidence. Faced with a complex parent problem, one student noted the ability to successfully address and resolve the issue through reframing the problem learned in the consultancy process. With the concern for administrative team building as cited in recent school reform literature (Elmore, 2000), it is interesting to observe that this experience appears to reinforce the importance of having a leadership "collegial circle" for feedback, support, and reflection. Therefore, these aspiring leaders at entrée level may, hopefully, embrace the concept of developing and being an active participant in a professional community that encourages learning through team inquiry.

Conclusion

Collaborative inquiry can be traced to Socrates. Raising question, reframing issues from alternate paradigms can be a provocative activity, but more importantly a necessary one to ensure that one is not blinded by one's own lens or viewpoint. The consultancy protocol has been effectively implemented by staff developers in assisting teachers in examining student work and teaching strategies to improve student learning through a non-threatening and group solidifying approach. In activating this procedure in the school leadership classroom, it appears that this technique has validity in addressing broader school issues. Site-based teams have been formed nationwide and when facilitated with objectivity and sensitivity to the participants, have provided invaluable insight and support for school reform. The consultancy protocol with its carefully designed procedure may be another approach to be used by today's school leaders in working with each other to deeply investigate issues and in the process reveal a host of new ideas.

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Biography

Dr. Estelle Kamler is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Administration at Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus. She is a former school superintendent who served as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, director for special educational services, and elementary principal. Dr. Kamler provides students with opportunities to experience many real-life administrative tasks and leadership events to build self-efficacy. One prong of her research agenda is the evaluation of her course work through self-reflection and more importantly the students' lenses.