Leadership and institutional change in the public sector: The case of secondary schools in England

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ABSTRACT

Leadership should be viewed as being embedded in a societal context and influenced by (as well as influencing) the institutional environment of organizations. Extant research on leadership, however, has largely neglected the effect of the institutional environment. To redress this imbalance we examine leadership in the context of institutional change in secondary school education in England. Specifically, we examine the co-existence of an emerging, government-prescribed, results-oriented approach to leadership (the new institution) with a more traditional professional value-based approach (the old institution). Our methodological approach utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis suggests that there are no significant performance differences between the two leadership approaches. Furthermore, school context does not appear to influence the leadership style employed. The qualitative analysis enabled us to better interpret these findings and to examine the enactment of leadership. The analysis suggests that although the new regulatory environment has fostered the development of the results-oriented leadership, it has not fully replaced professional value-based leadership. Rather, we found pockets of resistance to the policy-prescribed approach precisely in those areas that were targeted by the policy, namely, in schools with high percentage of socially deprived students. We conclude that a complex relationship exists between leadership and its institutional context.

1. Introduction

In pursuit of "re-inventing government" (Osborne & Gaebler 1992), policy-makers have emphasized more effective leadership to improve the performance of public sector organizations. Governmental emphasis on leadership is evident in the U.S.A., U.K., and other countries subject to Anglo-American influence, such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Hennessey, 1998; Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003). Many ideas about leadership have originated from studies of organizations in the private sector. Given this private sector focus, it is surprising, therefore, that a critical examination of government leadership policies has been slow to follow. Several scholars have called for an assessment of the influence of public sector context on the efficacy of different leadership approaches (Fairholm, 2004; Javidan & Waldman, 2003; Van Wart, 2003).

In this paper we adopt a sociological approach to examining leadership in the public sector (e.g., Weber, 1924/1947; Trice & Beyer, 1986; Beyer, 1999a) and stress that leadership cannot be divorced from the system-wide social structures and processes. Our research extends the previous conceptualizations of the contextual influences on leadership that are either rather narrow (as in the situational approaches focusing on the immediate organizational setting) or quite broad (as in the cross-country comparisons of the national cultures' impact on leadership) to emphasize the role of the institutional environment in which leadership is embedded (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987; Bryman, 1999). In doing so, we draw on neo-institutional theory (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001). This perspective directs attention to the ways in which organizations adopt certain

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procedures and practices (including specific leadership approaches), which serve to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of important constituents within their environments (Bryman, 1999). Employing insights from neo-institutional theory, we suggest that leadership styles are shaped not only by the leaders' personal characteristics and the situational/contingency factors, but also by the institutional environment, in which governmental regulatory agencies, professional associations, and educational and culture-producing establishments enforce, prescribe, and inculcate specific attitudes and behaviors.

Our empirical context is professional services organizations within the English public sector, specifically secondary schools. This is an illuminating context to examine the interaction of leadership and institutions, since it is subject to institutional transformation driven by policy-makers, with new and old institutions of leadership potentially set in opposition to each other. Traditionally, in the public sector, value-laden approaches to leadership, informed by professional and moral dimensions of leadership, have been dominant (Evers & Lakomski, 1991; Greenfield, 1991; Wright, 2001). More recently, performance-oriented government policy supports "results-oriented" leadership, aimed at improving schools through a focus on standards in, and competition amongst, schools (Hallinger, 2003). In our study, we focus on positional school leaders (school principals). Consistent with recent calls for greater methodological diversity in the study of leadership (for discussion of the value of integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of leadership, see Bryman, 2004) we employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to address two specific research questions.

Our first research question (RQ1) relates to the performance implications associated with different leadership approaches: *Is a new leadership style promoted by UK policy makers more effective than the traditional leadership styles in education?*

Empirical evidence suggests that leadership has a significant effect on organizational performance (Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld & Srinivasan, 2006; Bycio, Hackett & Allen, 1995; de Hoogh et al., 2004; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Ogbonna & Harris, 1999; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Critics, however, note that beyond a limited number of studies, much of the evidence on a positive association between leadership and superior performance has been circumstantial or anecdotal (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). Therefore, the link between leadership and performance might be regarded as an act of faith, rather than an empirically proven fact, which is particularly true of public sector organizations (Van Wart, 2003). Compounding this problem, conceptions of leadership in public sector organizations have been poorly defined (Fairholm, 2004), so no one leadership approach can be linked to superior organizational performance.

To address these limitations we delineated between two different approaches to leadership, namely: (1) a more traditional "professional value-based leadership" approach, which combines professional and moral dimensions of leadership, and (2) a more recent approach, encouraged by public policy, which we labeled "results-oriented leadership". We then assessed the impact of these two leadership approaches on school performance, employing a sample of 200 secondary (encompassing 11 to 16 or 18 year old pupils) schools in England. Quantitative data was compiled from publicly available sources on school performance and our own content analysis of the official inspectors' reports for leadership approaches in each school within our study.

Our second research question (RQ2) focuses on the actual enactment of leadership: *How do institutional forces affect the enactment of leadership?*

The significance of the wider social and cultural context for leadership has been considerably under-investigated (Bryman, 1999; Currie & Lockett, 2007; Pawar & Eastman, 1997), despite a call some 20 years ago to examine the interaction of leadership and institutions (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987) and notwithstanding a growing stream of sociological research on leadership (e.g., Beyer, 1999a,b; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Fairhurst, 2007). Consequently, in *The Leadership Quarterly* journal, many authors have recently drawn attention to the need to integrate the study of leadership with the analysis of organizations and their environments. For instance, Porter and McLaughlin (2006, pp. 573–574) concluded their survey of the leadership literature for 1990–2005 with a suggestion that "our understanding of leadership could be improved by making a concerted effort to focus directly on the nature of the organizational context as a primary object of interest" and "on the dynamic aspects of organizational context relationships." Similarly, Yammarino and colleagues (2005), in their review of the levels of analysis in research on leadership (p. 903), stated that, "in order to build a more comprehensive and integrative theory of leadership…multiple levels of analysis must be incorporated in theory and hypothesis formulation".

Of special significance to our research is the study by Bess and Goldman (2001), who examined the differences in leadership between different educational institutions undergoing systemic change. They demonstrated that leadership in higher education differed dramatically from leadership in elementary and high schools, because of "qualitative internal differences, variations in external conditions, and organizational cultural legacies" (Bess & Goldman, 2001, p. 419). They showed that none of the five core leadership theories (situational, charismatic, transformational, path–goal, and leader–member exchange) explained the leadership phenomena in their study as these theories did not "adequately incorporate the larger external system pressures on leaders" and urged "careful attention" to "the impact of external systemic influences on the organization and its leadership" (Bess & Goldman, 2001, pp. 419–420). To follow up on these suggestions and to gain a greater insight into the interaction between leadership and institutional environment, we drew upon our case-based research across 30 schools, which involved in-depth interviews with principals and deputy/assistant principals, whom we queried on how and why particular leadership approaches were enacted.

2. Leadership and neo-institutional theory

Leadership can be conceptualized as a set of processes occurring between individuals, groups and organizations and pertaining both to the means of influencing people and to shaping and achieving goals and outcomes (Heifetz, 1994). Consistent with the above definition, we take a sociological approach to leadership (e.g., Weber, 1924/1947; Trice & Beyer, 1986; Beyer, 1999a), which draws