Adaptive Leadership for Complex Decision-making in Extraordinary Times

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We are in a moment of opportunity. The struggle over who controls the future of America's public schools may come down to a matter of trust.

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In a recent conversation, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that democracy doesn't work anymore**.** He argued that democracy requires consensus, which can be time-consuming in a fast-moving world. Xi's remedy is that only autocracies are equipped to address the extraordinary challenges of modern times.

Every time has its extraordinary challenges, along with those leaders who contend that they alone can find and force a solution through an autocratic approach. *Every* time, however, also has those who embrace a democratic approach to governance. The tensions between these beliefs are universal and timeless. In current times, we are seeing them play out within our country and across the globe with great intensity.

Similarly, school organizations, not unlike larger governmental systems, are undergirded by implicit theories of leadership on a continuum from autocracy to democracy.

No matter the theory, educators within the system experience and understand how they are being governed. They also react and function in response to how they are being led. Repressive leadership generates resistance and recalcitrance. Collaborative leadership engenders engagement and esprit de corps that can assist in cultivating a climate for creative responses to problems facing the system.

Gifted leadership is a rarity. It is more common that those thrust into positions of authority must develop their leadership skills, which do not come with formal appointment or self-proclamation. It takes work to become a forward-thinking leader. It also takes humility through acceptance that one does not always have the answers.

Leaders who engage their staff thrive. They gain insights through multiple lenses that autocrats fail to access. Diverse insights enhance the leader's potential to adapt to

challenges to make creative forward-thinking decisions. Democratic leadership relies on the engagement of multiple voices bringing forth debate and multiple ideas. Whereas the autocrat employs command and control, relying on the perspectives of a limited and narrowed group. The former approach is complex and time-consuming, requiring consensus, which increases the likelihood of successful and enduring implementation.

Pinker (2018) cautions that "Problems are soluble, and each particular evil is a problem that can be solved. An optimistic civilization is open and not afraid to innovate and is based on traditions of criticism. Its institutions keep improving, and the most important knowledge that they embody is knowledge of how to detect and eliminate errors" (p. 7).

Autocrats rely on fear-induced compliance and expediency, often advancing solutions easily implemented but substantively flimsy. Again, Pinker (2018) suggests that for such leadership, "…the appeal of regressive ideas is perennial, and the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress always has to be made" (p. 452).

In her book, *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain: Exploring the Educational implications of Affective Neuroscience*, Dr. Helen Immordino-Yang, an associate professor of education, psychology, and neuroscience at the Brain and Creativity Institute and Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, presents evidence around the science behind the cognition-emotion link and why learners benefit when instruction reflects an integration of this essential relationship.

She warns against devaluing "emotion" in learning through tangential SEWL programs. Instead, her research reflects that emotion is essential for learning. Learning begins with it. Emotion serves as a basis for creativity, which influences one's academic and eventually adult decision-making. Immordino-Yang makes the case that traditional academic subjects, such as math, engineering, or physics, rely on deep understanding that depends on one's ability to make emotional connections between concepts.

Her research has implications for leaders. How do leaders support the professionals by motivating them through a sense of agency? How can school leaders and teachers use an understanding of the effects of emotion and narrative on cognition? How do we create safe spaces for adults working on the front lines of our schools to solve the extraordinary challenges of our times? Our leaders, if they truly want to innovate, need to be attuned to a science of collaboration and engagement.

Leaders towards the autocratic end of the leadership continuum are possessed by a fear of knowing, exacerbated by aversion to engagement with those who hold opposing viewpoints.

They become trapped in silos of confirmation bias, limiting their ability to make innovative and impactful decisions. Heifetz (2009) warned, "The improvisational ability to lead adaptively relies on responding to the present situation rather than importing the past into the present and laying it on the current situation like an imperfect template" (p.199). Today's decision makers face extraordinary challenges. To overcome them, they will need to lead with innovative and collaborative approaches.

The Winter 2024 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice* examines a set of complex and common challenges related to equity, technology integration, effects of the pandemic, and the design of future-oriented

instruction. While topics may seem disparate, all intersect around a common theme of leadership's ability to adapt and innovate through collaboration.

In their commentary, "Moving Beyond the 'Digital Divide': Three Steps for an Anti-racist Approach to Equitable Participation in K-12 Schools," Michigan State researchers, Kyle Dunbar and Aman Yadav reflect on the intersection of equity, technology, and learning.

Asserting that the issuance of devices to all students does not address a "digital divide," the authors call for superintendents to interrogate whether technology used for instruction is a continuance of inequitable instruction or is being used to transform student learning through a culturally responsive model.

They encourage leaders to move beyond a micro-focus on academic gaps to find how well they are incorporating technology to achieve a "compelling instructional vision for equity," and from there use these new tools to consider students' lived experiences, cultures, and identities in the instructional design.

In "The Influence of COVID-19 on Campus Leaders' Curriculum Integration, Perceptions Towards, and Acquired Expertise in Technology," Martinez, Corrales, and Peters present their research on how effective

technology integration comes from teachers sensing a closer presence of school leaders in everyday pedagogical activities.

Their study describes the importance of not only a principal's acceptance of instructional technology but the leader's support of related professional development. Again, readers will see how the engagement of leaders with their staff, especially in fostering a learning organization, brings success.

Following the statement that "Public schools and the public-school systems are complex, and a leader cannot apply a single leadership style to all situations while producing positive results," Flanders-Dick, Hood, Hebert, and Shrub state that "school systems consist of multiple levels, including the classroom, school, district, and state.

The decisions at one level affect other levels and the stakeholders within a system." In their study, "Multi-Level Educational Leadership Model: Meeting the Needs of the 21st Century Classroom," these researchers emphasize the importance of leadership in attending to the complexity of a school system's multi-level structure to avoid the risk of ignoring influence within its complex layers. Without such engagement, incorporating technology into instruction will be hampered: "Teacher efficacy is directly linked to school leadership and culture."

References

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