

Check Under the Hood:

How does your Organization Really Work?

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After a short tenure as a Vice-Principal, I picked up the phone on a March night. It was my Assistant Superintendent, and he cut to the chase with, "Would you like to be a Principal?"

"You bet," I said.

"Great," he responded. "Can you start on Monday?"

As a new administrator, I basically learned my role on the job. Although I had some skills, I was aware that I lacked a great deal of the organizational knowledge I needed to run a school full of employees, lead a community of parents, and harness it all to best serve my students. Sure, I could get by on instinct; but I was a single administrator in a small school, and I still had questions. Just like with a car, I was compelled to look under the hood to see what made my organization run. Policy manuals, provincial legislation, and administrative colleagues were helpful but I wanted to know more about organizational forces such as politics, using influence, and making rational decisions. I used to joke with my Assistant Superintendent about when I would receive my instruction manual on operating a school.

There is no 'School Administrator's Instruction Manual'. Learning the art of school administration relies heavily on the apprentice system where you become a Vice-Principal, learn from a wise and supportive Principal, then become a Principal yourself and figure out the rest on your own. Evolving from classrooms, administrators are well schooled in educational practice, but not in the job of managing and excelling in a complex, multifaceted organization. Instead of Reading, Writing, and Math, your tasks are now Organizing, Motivating, Communicating, and Negotiating, mostly with adults. Unfortunately, the accumulated knowledge from your instructional days is not sufficient when dealing with unions, a remote boss, funding shortfalls, and political interplay. Administrators need PLD that is more than teaching and learning so that they can understand the organizational nuts and bolts which

include how to motivate employees, why teachers perform at different levels, and objective decision-making. Seek PLD beyond the familiar topics in the learning realm that reveal more of the fundamental underpinnings of how your organization functions. It benefits us to look not just at what we do, but how we do it.

Organizational Behaviour (OB) is the study of how people work and interact in groups – large and small – as they pursue common goals, and the study of OB is the first step in helping people function more efficiently in an organization. Just as you learned about pedagogical practice as a teacher, administrators need to learn about the ways our schools and districts function as large collectives.

As examples, I have offered two areas in OB and – to whet your appetite – each topic is punctuated with questions that may be helpful in generating discussions or continued professional learning.

Motivation: More Than Just Money.

Every leader needs to be well-versed in the art of motivation. People assume that money is the most effective motivator, but that is not necessarily true. Case in point: after you received your last (well-deserved, I might say) salary increase, I am willing to bet that you did not work harder, arrive earlier, and stay later. Although money can be a motivator, it works best when tied to a specific outcome like the number of ditches you dig or how many boxes you pack; it is not as effective in salaried positions. On the other hand, if your Superintendent publicly recognizes you at a monthly admin meeting, or announces your appointment to an important district committee, you might gain a little bounce in your step. Among the ten motivators generally recognised as effective in the workplace, being appreciated for your work, having work with intrinsic value, or having an understanding boss who keeps you informed can be more powerful than cash in your hand. Most

interestingly, many of the top ten motivators cost no money at all.

A general list of the top 10 best motivators looks like this:

- Recognition for your work
- Positive work environment and culture
- Thoughtful, understanding management
- Intrinsically motivating work
- Good wages
- Job security
- Opportunities for growth and career advancement
- Trustworthy management
- Being included in a meaningful way
- Trusted autonomy

Thinking question:

Which of these motivational factors are most present in your workplace, and which ones could you easily implement? Which motivators do you best respond to?

While a raise in pay is not necessarily a direct motivator, if you feel you are not being compensated fairly in relation to your responsibilities or compared to your peers, even that small amount of money can become a demotivator, as inequity is a powerful, negative force. A raise of \$500 might go unnoticed, but if you discover that you are earning \$500 less than your peers, that gap would have a significant negative effect.

The psychologist Frederick Herzberg divided his motivational theory into two parts: Motivational and Hygiene Factors. Increasing Motivational Factors such as job recognition, achievement, personal

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growth opportunities, or job responsibility can motivate workers and increase productivity. On the other hand, increasing Hygiene Factors such as pay, working conditions, or supervisor quality only maintains job satisfaction but does not act as a motivator. However, if the Hygiene Factors are not provided in sufficient quantity, they become a source of demotivation. I recently saw an interesting notice posted by a construction company at a busy worksite that listed how the company was 'committed to elevating the work experience of every worker' by providing amenities like breakrooms with shelves for work helmets, coolers for lunches, hydration stations, and provisions for prayer and wellness. Someone in that company had a good understanding of Herzberg, and while nobody is going to work harder because they have a shelf in the breakroom, they are likely to be more satisfied with their employer and less likely to quit. Retention is a huge issue in the construction business, and this company seems to have a good understanding of how to keep their employees.

Thinking question:

Is retention an issue in education and, if it is, how could districts and schools address the problem?

There are several motivational theories to be explored such as Herzberg's Two Factor Theory of Motivation, McClellan's Human Motivation Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which may be familiar to many educators. McGregor's X-Y Theory deserves consideration as Theory X managers believe that workers dislike work, avoid responsibility, need close supervision, and only respond to rewards or punishments. In contrast, Theory Y managers believe that workers enjoy their job, embrace responsibility, need little supervision, and work best in a cordial and collaborative environment. In the workplace, managers are not all X or Y, but have a tendency to favour one or the other and will gravitate to that extreme when managing under pressure. Education in general is a very collaborative workplace but there are still, in my experience, Theory X managers out there.

We spend around 90,000 hours of our life at work. More than just getting paid, employees look to their employer to provide the right conditions to motivate them to do their best, therefore administrators need to have a sophisticated understanding of motivational practice to fully engage employees as they work towards our primary goal of educating our students.

Thinking question:

How could you use Herzberg to attract and increase the retention of Educational Assistants in your school or district? Do you tend to be more of a Theory X or Theory Y manager, and how does your staff respond to each approach?

People, Perceptions, and I Know What You Are Thinking.

An old family story goes like this. My grandfather wanted a new car, so he dressed in his usual, well-

worn set of clothes, and set off. After receiving no attention at the first dealership, he walked across the road to the competing lot where he was greeted by a smiling salesman. Minutes later, he wrote a cheque for the full price of a new car and headed home. It was arguably the fastest sale of the day, and all it took was managing perceptions.

Our perceptions are built by gathering information from our environment and then making sense of it all by using our knowledge, needs and desires, personal interests, and cognitive bias. The saying 'perception is reality' is true, but it is only your reality; other people see the world differently. All eyes are upon you as a leader while you make hundreds of decisions. It is incumbent upon you to manage your perceptions, as you want to be seen as open and objective. The problem is that we all have cognitive biases – strong, preconceived ideas – in our thinking. These preconceptions are like little shortcuts that help you to quickly process information. If you walk into a restaurant that is dirty or a little shabby, your bias or mental shortcut will tell you that it is time to look for another place to eat. On the other hand, cognitive biases can distort your perceptions, so it is important to understand how bias can have a powerful grip on your thinking as you make decisions and manage work relationships. You might identify with some of these examples of bias.

Have you been in a meeting where it doesn't really matter what you say, because the other person has it all figured out? Any evidence you present that does not fit this person's pre-established mindset is discounted, but facts that confirm their preconceptions are readily accepted. This is an example of Confirmation Bias, where one tends to only listen or pay attention to information that confirms their thinking, yet discounts any information that is contrary. Another bias is the Bandwagon Effect. I am sure you have experienced this, where a person will adopt a belief based on the number of other people who support that belief. Asymmetric Insight is another bias that, in my experience, is

fairly established in education. This cognitive bias is where you assume that you have greater insight into others than they have into you. For example, in your position as a school leader, you can clearly identify the various groups and alliances within your staff, yet you are quite certain that your staff does not see that you may have your own favourites.

And then there is the teacher who often comes in just before the bell, mumbles something about 'the traffic', and rushes off to their room to get ready. But you know better. The 'traffic' is just another excuse, and the real reason is that this teacher is not committed to their job. If they cared, they would be here early. In contrast, when you are late, the reason is always 'circumstances beyond your control', like being stuck in the Tim Horton's drive-through, and your lateness has nothing to do with commitment. Fundamental Attribution Error is another cognitive bias where, when observing others, you attribute their behaviour to personal traits (they are uncommitted) and discount the external factors (they were late because of traffic); yet when you analyze your own behaviour, you over-attribute your actions to external reasons (a slow drive-through) and discount your personal traits (you don't pay attention to the time).

It is critical for a leader to understand they have cognitive bias, especially in the fast-paced pressure cookers that schools can be. These mental shortcuts may save time and effort but, in the end, they can skew your perceptions, sway your decisions, and affect both how you lead and are perceived as a leader. You may not see bias in your actions, but likely your staff does.

Searching for patterns in your thinking, seeking out contrary information, and embracing multiple perspectives can help you reduce cognitive bias. Carefully testing your perceptions and checking for bias allows you to be a better leader, be seen as open, empathetic, and collaborative, and to act more objectively.

Thinking question:

Do you have Blind Spot Bias which is not allowing you to recognize your own cognitive bias? What biases show in your thinking, and how do these affect your subordinates?

'I Don't Do Politics.'

You have heard it many times – maybe you have voiced it yourself – but it is not true. The reality is that politics are everywhere that you find people, and political behaviours are a natural part of every organization. Politics is the process of exercising influence when finding solutions to problems in an environment with limited resources. When people vie for what they feel is best, given the resources they have, the politics begin. Put four friends in a car, and try to decide where to go for dinner. There is only one dinner, and competing interests begin to arise — some don't like certain types of food, others don't want to pay too much, and the driver is worried about where to park.

What most people object to is the dark side of politics, when individuals use unsavory means and when influence and persuasion transition to intimidation and coercion. In our dinner scenario, this might be when someone attempts to force the decision by threatening to reveal personal information about another passenger, or the driver pulls rank by announcing that because they are driving, they will

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pick the restaurant. Unfortunately, unpleasant politics are part of the workplace, and we have all seen where spreading rumours, lying, gaslighting, using the power of position, and associating with powerful people can be used to force an outcome. So, do you engage in politics? Yes, you do, because you can't divorce yourself from every decision made in the workplace. But as you use your influence to shape outcomes, put your focus on behaving ethically, speaking up for yourself, and staying professional to avoid the sullied stain of unscrupulous politics that everyone dislikes.

Thinking question:

Small 'p' politics are everywhere in the workplace. What examples can you find where politics were used in a positive way to benefit your Organization?

Your PLD

When I started as an administrator, I didn't know what I didn't know, but I wish that part of my learning had been about Organizational Behaviour. I had too many questions and not enough information about how things worked; because I never did receive my 'School Administrator's Instruction Manual', I created my own. School administrators are amazing educators and leaders who need both a superior understanding of teaching and learning and a thorough understanding of the organizational forces in our schools and districts. Looking under the hood and studying Organizational Behavior will provide you with important insights into your workplace, support your efforts as a leader, and help improve the organization in which you work as you pursue the best educational outcomes for your students.

There are many topics available to you for PLD and I have highlighted Organizational Behaviour as an

area that needs attention as it is vital to a healthy and efficient workplace.

Here are some PLD ideas for you and your colleagues to explore.

- The BCPVPA provides a wide variety of professional development that can be tailored to the questions and needs of you and your district colleagues, with topics such as 'The 4 Essentials of Leadership', '5 Choices to Extraordinary Productivity', and one of my areas of interest, 'Unconscious Bias.' Visit the professional learning tab at bcpvpa.org
- Use the principles of adult learning for PLD. 'Sit and Git' does not work for knowledgeable, experienced professionals like you. For PLD, use case studies and real-life examples, set clear goals for learning outcomes that can change behaviour, and ensure that learning has strong intrinsic value.
- Look outside of education: the business world struggles with the same issues we do. The Harvard Business Review has great case studies, short, helpful articles, and an extensive back-issue library covering hundreds of useful topics. It is an excellent resource and can be accessed on-line for about \$15 per month. In addition, I enjoy the podcast, 'Work Life' by Adam Grant, who discusses problems in the workplace with interesting guests. In his opening, Grant tells listeners that his job as an organizational psychologist is, 'how not to make work suck.'

Have you studied Organizational Behaviour to enhance your practice? Tell us more!



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