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RANDY WOLFF

LEADERS AND THEIR USE OF POWER IN FACILITATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Introduction

Direction setting is a common practice in North American organizations. Organizational leaders often unquestioningly accept traditional direction-setting strategies as best practices. Some organizations have incorporated participatory approaches to direction setting in an attempt to build the organization on the values and passions of its members, or at least to foster ownership of predetermined values through a process of joint decision-making. Yet how does power influence direction-setting processes and the directional knowledge that those processes seek to generate? What happens to a direction-setting process when people group together around a shared perspective about the future shape of the organization? How does this sharing of perspectives intersect with power and knowledge? The outcome of most direction-setting processes is some sort of direction plan that often includes a mission statement, preferred core values, and a statement of vision. What factors influence the formulation of these kinds of direction plans? What effect might the degree of representation have on the motivational levels of those asked to give themselves to the direction plan? These are critical questions because they draw attention to potential problems with typical direction-setting processes, even those that claim to be highly collaborative in nature.

As an attempt to begin answering these questions, I will describe one particular direction-setting process, two sets of theoretical lenses that are helpful for understanding direction-setting processes, and some les-

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sons I learned about navigating some of the power intersections that leaders may encounter in an organizational change process.

The Direction-setting Process at LC

I had the privilege of serving as a pastor for 16 years at a church I will simply call LC. Toward the end of my time at LC, the church went through an intensive, yearlong direction-setting process dubbed “refocusing.” Five years later, when I was no longer a pastor at the church, I conducted an ethnographic case study in which I interviewed 20 participants to get a broader and deeper understanding of what happened during that year. I was particularly interested in how power intersected with the process. As a leader who was vitally involved in the process and who desired to become a more effective leader in the future, I wanted to discern how we used and mediated the use of power well and when our power usages were less effective or even inappropriate.

LC’s direction-setting process involved hiring an external consultant who worked with a “refocusing team” (which included seven people from the church) to facilitate the direction-setting process. The main impetus for starting the process was to determine a clear direction for the church because the lead pastor had recently resigned and some people felt that the church lacked direction. The first part of the refocusing process was personal in nature. Approximately 100 people from the church went through a 10-hour process to articulate their sense of personal calling, comprised of a biblical purpose, core values and vision. The second part of the refocusing process, which only those who had participated in personal refocusing could attend, featured three weekend summits where attendees worked on a direction plan for the church. The assumption was that those who had a clear sense of their own calling would be in a good position to help articulate the church’s purpose, core values and vision. Small discussion groups, known as pulse groups, followed each summit where anyone in the church could give feedback on the summaries coming out of the summits. The final products of the process were a ministry direction plan and a pastoral profile that described the kind of lead pastor we thought could help us achieve our plan.

Being a leader of the refocusing process gave me an insider perspective. Because I had been a pastor at the church for many years, I had a good understanding of the context in which refocusing took place. I also had longstanding relationships with the refocusing participants, which may have helped them to share more freely during the subsequent inter-

views. Of course, I also brought biases into the research process. I have seen many abuses and misuses of power by those in privileged positions, and so I was probably more open to seeing these inappropriate and ineffective uses of power by the privileged elite. I am also a big believer in inclusiveness. I view anything that I perceive as unfairly exclusionary in a dim light. When it comes to group decision-making, I am skeptical of processes that move too quickly toward consensus-building. I am much more supportive of processes that encourage divergent thinking where people feel free to contribute and give due consideration to contrary ideas before attempting to build consensus.

During LC's refocusing process, I wholeheartedly agreed with most aspects of the process. However, in retrospect, I view certain aspects of the process with skepticism. My perspective has changed. For example, I am now a big believer in transparency. Some of the refocusing incidents that featured what I now perceive as inappropriate uses of power revolved around a lack of transparency. I was not thinking that way during the process itself. It is also important to note that I felt hurt by some of the traditionalists during and after the refocusing process. This hurt probably tainted my perception of the traditionalist's role in the process and subsequent initiatives. I also believe that churches often marginalize women and youth; I probably looked for data that would confirm this belief. In order to counteract this potential bias as I conducted my research, I tried to be reflective—to be aware of my assumptions and the interrelationships between these assumptions. The process was also open to others who could monitor my biases, at least to some degree.

Theoretical Lenses

In order to generate insights about the intersections of power during LC's direction-setting process, I employed various theoretical lenses, including those related to power and shared perspectives.

Power Lens

Gordon and Grant (2004) have proposed three power categories: power-as-entity, power-as-strategy, and power-is-knowledge. In coming up with these three categories, Gordon and Grant surveyed a wide variety of literature related to power and knowledge management. They initially identified 4,235 periodical articles from between 1986 and 2004 that focused on the topic of "knowledge management." Of these 4,235 articles, they noted that 138 focused specifically on "knowledge management and power." Most of these articles tended to picture power as a

determinable entity. Only four of the articles described power as a type of strategic relationship. Gordon and Grant found this dearth of articles on power-as-strategy problematic. They contend that even though viewing power as an entity is useful, it does not adequately take into account the power at play in strategic interactions. They use Foucauldian conceptions of power to describe how relationships, and the actions that emerge from those relational connections, function as sources of power.

However, even though the literature on knowledge management and power focused on the power-as-entity and to a lesser degree the power-as-strategy approaches to power, they believed that a third major approach to power exists. Based on the works of neo-Foucauldian thinkers such as Flyvbjerg and Huugaard, they contend that power is in fact knowledge itself. For example, power structures often provide parameters around “acceptable knowledge.” These same power structures often repel or minimize contradictory knowledge. Power becomes knowledge because it determines the nature of acceptable knowledge in a given context. Gordon and Grant’s conceptions of power provide a complex understanding of power that encompasses both traditional and postmodern approaches to power. Gordon and Grant write from a knowledge management perspective, which is particularly relevant for direction-setting processes that involve the construction and management (even manipulation) of direction-oriented knowledge. Because of their comprehensive survey of the power and knowledge management literature and inclusion of postmodern ways of conceiving power, I chose to use their set of lenses for viewing power to frame my understanding of the use of power during LC’s direction-setting process.

Shared Perspective Lens

Webber (2002) has articulated a framework for understanding church perspectives amongst evangelical Christians. He believes that evangelical Christians hold to three basic church perspectives: traditional, pragmatic, and younger evangelical. The traditional evangelicals in Webber’s description tend to reflect a modern (as opposed to postmodern) perspective. McLaren (2002) describes this modern perspective as “a broad, coherent culture in Western civilization, arising (more or less) in the sixteenth century and developing through the twentieth, a culture dominated by science, consumerism, conquest, rationalism, mechanism, analysis, and objectivity” (p. 53). According to Webber (2002), traditional evangelicals view Christianity as a rational worldview. They tend to prefer pastor-centered neighborhood churches with traditional forms of worship.

Webber (2002) views pragmatic evangelicals as products of market-driven economies that constantly seek to increase production and boost profits. Because of their emphasis on numerical growth, pragmatic evangelicals prefer large churches of over 1,000 people that require pastoral CEOs to run them. These churches often employ contemporary worship methods to attract new people. Pragmatic evangelicals find their spirituality in success. When they feel that their efforts for God are successful as evidenced in numerical growth, they feel that they are growing spiritually, as well.

The permission to think critically about Christian beliefs and practices has gained even greater momentum in recent years amongst the group that Webber (2002) calls “younger evangelicals.” They want meaningful relationships, not efficient programs; authenticity and transparency, not pretending; and being over doing. According to Webber, younger evangelicals view Christianity as a community of faith. They prefer small churches that emphasize team leadership. They tend to want a convergent style of worship that uses traditional and contemporary methods for helping worshippers converge on a particular biblical theme. For younger evangelicals, spirituality is the authentic embodiment of biblical values. The preferred values of younger evangelicals are a reaction to some of the ideals of pragmatic evangelicals, but they also reflect the influence of postmodern thinking. Webber’s categorization of evangelicals in terms of three perspectives provides a helpful framework for understanding subculture perspectives and potential clashes between perspective-based groups in churches.

Understanding church perspectives is important for understanding how cultural subgroups can influence direction-setting processes. As people coalesce around a particular perspective, the power of that perspective increases within the “truth-authenticating” regime. As Becker’s (1999) study shows, perspective clashes played an important part in settling which model will characterize a congregation in the future. In keeping with Foucault’s (Rabinow, 1984) view of knowledge and power, the perspective struggles themselves are exertions of power that define what is acceptable and even true. Perspective groupings represent an important source of power. In some instances, the groupings may fall along relational lines in keeping with Gordon and Grant’s (2004) power-as-strategy approach to power. However, the groupings may also organize around ideological principles as described by Webber (2002). When a shared perspective grouping gains dominance in an organization, they can often determine the nature of acceptable knowledge. Power then becomes knowledge (Gordon and Grant’s third approach to power).

What I Discovered

I have learned a great deal from my research of LC's refocusing process. How many times do leaders have the opportunity to probe in an in-depth fashion a leadership experience of which they were a part? Because I was viewing the process primarily through a power lens (I could have assessed the process with other lenses), the insights I gleaned relate to how power intersected with the process. In particular, I detected nine sources of power: privilege, discursive practices, outspokenness, trust, shared perspectives, symbols, transparency, pain and intimidation. What follows is a description of these power sources and some recommendations as to how leaders might use and mediate the use of these types of power in a way that is of maximum benefit to the organization and its members.

Privilege

Gordon and Grant (2004), in their discussion of the power-as-entity approach to power, suggest that people can exert power based on their official position. Privilege was alive and well at LC. As a participant in refocusing, I felt at the time that refocusing was highly participatory and that it was an organization-wide process. Yet, looking back at the process, I can see that three privileged groups (the board, refocusing team, and summit participants) dominated the knowledge formation process. My findings showed that the board chose the type of knowledge formation process (as laid out by the external consultant hired to facilitate the process), selected the facilitators of the knowledge discussions (refocusing team), and invited a select group of people (summit participants) who became the major authors of the knowledge script. The implications for leadership focus on being careful not to underestimate the power of privileged groups, even in a process that is highly participatory. It is the privileged groups that tend to have the most influence in articulating a shared sense of culture.

In LC's case, it was supposedly unwieldy to involve everyone in the summit discussions (there were almost 400 adults in the church), so the refocusing team invited key leaders to participate. The summit participants became a privileged group in which members had the chance to become primary authors of the emerging directional knowledge. Anyone in the church could participate in post-summit pulse groups; however, these groups tended to perform more of an editing role, fine-tuning what summit participants had already decided. In order to give more people a substantive voice in the direction-setting process, pulse groups could

have preceded the weekend summits. The leadership at the summits would have heard from more people first before they made any decisions.

Of course, the progressives may have still dominated the pulse groups. To address this possibility, the refocusing team could have organized pulse groups along subculture lines (e.g., age, gender, perspectives) so as to identify some of the shared values within LC's subcultures. This may have also served to reduce the intimidation factor for some participants. The summits would then have focused on taking the ideas from the pulse groups and developing a shared sense of identity while preserving local subgroup identities. They also would have been the place where individual identities, as articulated during personal refocusing, found their way into the discussions. The goal would not have been simply to come up with a shared sense of identity (which supposedly is what happened), but to hold in dynamic tension three levels of identities: organizational, subgroup, and individual.

This kind of multi-layered directional knowledge is powerful because it taps into the passion of personal calling (what people believe God would have them to do in life), capitalizes on the rallying power of shared values within a subgroup often knit together by strategic relationships, and shows people the larger playing field (the organizational identity) on which they can live out their personal and subgroup identities. Part of maintaining this dynamic equilibrium may have been to revisit people's personal callings (from the first phase of the refocusing process) after articulating a shared sense of identity. This would have helped to bring personal calling back to the forefront of people's awareness. It also would have been helpful to meet again with various subgroups in the organization to assess whether they felt like they could still express their local identities within the desired organizational culture. The process of maintaining equilibrium between a sense of organizational identity, the identities of subgroups, and the identities of individual organizational members is an ongoing process requiring sensitivity, strong communication, and timely negotiations.

Discursive Practices

Throughout the refocusing process, the refocusing team employed various discursive practices that had a powerful effect on the process. Discursive practices are the value-laden processes that construct cultural meaning. Some of these practices included the use of language, the selection of specific Scriptures (and the exclusion of others), the use of lists and examples to frame refocusing discussions, and the move to

create consensus that seemed to minimize diversity. Related to the use of language, it became apparent during refocusing that certain words like “refocusing” exerted considerable influence on people. “Refocusing” suggests that something about the current focus needs alteration. As you can imagine, many of the traditionalists were not thrilled about a process that had a label that proclaimed the need for change. Discursive practices are a potentially powerful shaper of individual values, subgroup values, and the values of the organizational membership as a whole. Organizational leaders would do well to assess the impact of their words and other discursive practices, so that they do not unduly influence direction-setting (or other organizational) processes.

Outspokenness

My findings showed that some outspoken people directed the directional discussions. Outspokenness was a power entity that people could use to influence the knowledge formation process. The perception of authority, reinforced at times by outspokenness, can be powerful. Organizational leaders need to recognize that some dominant personalities can hijack a direction-setting process. It is important to identify these people and help them to encourage others less dominant to participate (and perhaps become less dominating as they do so). This kind of help could take the form of encouragement (encouraging vocal participants to provide a context for others to speak), training (helping vocal participants acquire specific techniques for encouraging others to participate), and role designation (giving vocal participants facilitating roles where they help provide a context for more equitable participation). When individuals dominate, some people in both small and large group settings tend to withdraw. This can hinder the recognition and expression of individual values, a necessary part of a multi-layered knowledge formation process.

Trust

My findings revealed that trustworthy people had power to influence those who trusted them. One couple personified trustworthiness during LC’s refocusing process. Interviewees mentioned the husband and wife eight and five times respectively as key influencers during refocusing. They had longevity in the church, and even though they were not serving in leadership positions during refocusing, they had done so in the past. It is important for organizational leaders to identify those within their organization, like this couple, who instill confidence in others and

to help them use their power to bring about participation that is more equitable (through encouragement, training, and role designation as mentioned above). This will help to insure that individual values become an integral part of the organization's directional knowledge.

Shared Perspectives

My findings showed that the progressives dominated all three privileged groups (church board, refocusing team, and summit participants) during LC's refocusing process. I discovered that a fairly powerful group of traditionalists either opted out of refocusing altogether or chose not to add their perspective to the discussion mix. Yet the traditionalists were active outside of the official refocusing venues. The conflict between the two groups featured deployments of power around the symbols that would express and perpetuate the church's identity. I discovered that because the progressives dominated the privileged groups, they designed, presented, and approved a progressive direction plan with little opposition. This occurred even with mechanisms in place for organization-wide input into the emerging directional knowledge. The implication for organizational leaders is that they need to monitor the influence of their privileged groups and make sure that the input given during feedback loops carries as much weight (or at least enough weight to make a difference) as the voices of those in the privileged groups. If this does not happen, the resultant direction plan becomes a plan of the organizational elite and not of the rest of the organizational members. This becomes especially problematic when organizational leaders try to mobilize organizational members to achieve the direction plan, only to find that many do not own it and consequently have little desire to implement it.

Symbols

My findings revealed that worship style and staff were important symbols that reflected the church's truth regime. Worship style was especially powerful because it connected with people's culture, the way they preferred to communicate with God. Changes to either symbol meant that the church (its truth regime or shared sense of culture) was also changing. These findings are in keeping with what Becker (1999) discovered about how identity conflicts in congregations are "conflicts over the power to symbolize different understandings of the congregation's identity and to institutionalize these understandings in very concrete ways" (pp. 4-5).

My study showed that symbols can play an important unifying role.

The fact that the lead pastor role and worship style were in transition at the same time heightened some people's anxiety over which perspective would guide the selection of future symbols. Organizational leaders must exercise caution when attempting to change organizational symbols and recognize their importance as beacons that communicate present and future organizational direction. Important symbols may also serve to rivet people's attention and rally them to action. They can serve as flashpoints for conflict. Choosing new symbols can become the victor's prize for whoever wins the battle. Symbols are noticeable and often distract from actual shared values and the values of subgroups and individuals. Leaders would do well to negotiate the selection of symbols carefully to reflect the actual shared values of the organization without diminishing the values of individuals and subgroups.

Transparency

My study revealed that transparency went a long way in minimizing tensions at LC. During the second summit, the refocusing facilitator instructed participants to read Romans 12-15 and to share with the rest of the group how God had spoken to them through the passage. This led to a time of public confession and reconciliation. People extended empathy and compassion, which brought some participants closer together. Many of those within the official refocusing circles appreciated the increased transparency that the refocusing process mandated (e.g., the church board established a board covenant, which outlined how they would strive to be more transparent with the congregation). It helped to promote respect and trust.

Perhaps it is possible for subgroups to experience greater connectedness via bridges of transparency. An implication for organizational leaders is that leadership transparency is a good organizational practice because it communicates that leaders value and trust others within the organization. This kind of trust helps pave the way for individuals and subgroups to live out their values without feeling intimidated. My findings suggest that organizational connectedness is important for organizational success. Leaders would do well to recognize that a healthy connectedness (at interpersonal and inter-subgroup levels) within an organization requires intentional measures that foster ongoing and respectful perspective sharing.

Pain

Pain paralyzed some people at LC. The church had gone through a major crisis as their longstanding lead pastor of 13 years had resigned in a cloud of controversy. Many people felt hurt. My findings showed that this pain contributed to some people's unwillingness to engage in the refocusing process. Some could not deal with more change, while others opted out of the process to protest the board's role in the lead pastor's resignation. In some cases, people's pain seemed to add to their feelings of intimidation. It is important that organizational leaders recognize the paralyzing power of pain and seek to promote healing for the good of hurting individuals and the good of the organization. This ongoing process requires sensitive intervention, as appropriate. People paralyzed by their pain are not going to contribute as they could to a direction-setting process. This is one reason why organizational leaders might want to consider direction setting as an ongoing process and not a one-time event that some may not be able to participate in for a variety of reasons.

Intimidation

According to my findings, some traditionalists felt too intimidated to participate in refocusing. They either opted out of the process completely, or tended to remain quiet during the official refocusing discussions. The pain associated with losing their leader and the fact that the progressives dominated all three privileged groups in the process seemed to contribute to this sense of intimidation. This finding is an important contribution to participatory or collaborative leadership theory. It is simply not enough to promote widespread participation in organizational direction setting. Organizational leaders must recognize the politics of intimidation and take steps to minimize this intimidation by welcoming divergent contributions to the knowledge formation discussions. This may mean organizing specific pulse groups that target marginalized individuals and subgroups.

My study revealed that two other groups, women and youth, felt intimidated during the refocusing process. As a result, some in those groups did not think that they contributed much to the refocusing process, or did not believe their ideas carried much weight in the discussions. The implication for leaders is that they should seek to uncover why people feel intimidated and take the necessary steps to address this intimidation. As with some of the other leadership implications, the equitable distribution of power may help to reduce these feelings of intimidation for some people. Leaders may also want to consider offer-

ing education that helps those who feel intimidated to become more assertive so that they can claim the power that they have and that others may extend to them. This is not a “blame the victim” approach, but rather an acknowledgement that some people may require additional skills to claim the power that is rightfully theirs.

Conclusion

The insights I have gleaned from my research on LC’s direction-setting process have deeply impacted me as someone who desires to grow as a leader. I have become much more aware of how organizational processes such as direction setting continuously intersect with exercises of power. These acts of power have a profound influence on how these processes unfold. Because of my research, I am much more sensitive to organizational power dynamics. Though my research at LC is over, for me, the application of the findings is a lifelong process. May these insights inspire and guide organizational leaders as we seek to use and help others use power in ways that facilitate the construction of knowledge that is of maximum benefit to organizational members and the organizations in which they serve. This, in my view, is a key leadership task.

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