From disabling to empowering:

The impact of organizational cultures on ethical leadership

Objectives

1) to better understand organizational conditions which foster or hinder the unfoldment of ethical leadership; 2) to support educational leaders who endeavor to act ethically and in a responsible manner.

Conceptual framework

Ethical leadership

Inspired by Starratt's seminal paper (1991) and our own findings, we define ethical leadership as a social practice by which moral judgment is finely articulated in the ethics of justice, care and critique and in the optimal exercise of ethical sensitivity. (Langlois, Lapointe, Valois & De Leeuw, 2014).

Ethical sensitivity

According to Langlois (2013),

> «Through ethical sensitivity, we are touched by situations and events involving ethical issues of concern to us as we question them to situate ourselves authentically and critically in context against dogmatism and certainties.» (Langlois, 2013, p. 818)

Organizational culture

According to Langlois & Lapointe (2007) and (Trevino (2007), the culture of an organization exerts informal control over administrators who sometimes feel restricted by their professional responsibilities and functions. Therefore distinct types of organizational cultures influence differently educational leaders' ethical conduct and sensitivity.

Data sources and methods

Using our databank of more than 300 interviews on ethical dilemmas experienced by educational leaders, we developed a typology of decision-making rationales linked to each of the three ethical dimensions proposed by Starratt. We then used this typology to create and validate an instrument (Langlois et al, in press) that measures four constructs: the ethic of care, the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, and ethical sensitivity, as well as three types of organizational cultures: supporting, controlling and indifferent.

Data was collected from a sample of 668 North American educational leaders. Analysis variance (ANOVA) at the 5 percent significance level was used to examine the relationships between ethical sensitivity, ethical leadership (critique, care and justice), and type of support provided by the organization (indifferent, controlling, supporting).

Findings

Our results indicate a strong statistical relationship 1) between the type of culture which exists in an organization and the presence of ethical leadership, and 2) between ethical leadership and the presence of ethical sensitivity. A supporting type of culture where superiors inform, consult with and listen to leaders nurtures the development of a three-dimensional balanced ethical leadership; a controlling culture where superiors prevent leaders from exercising their professional judgment reduces their ethical leadership to a unidimensional capacity; an indifferent type of culture, where superiors offer to support at all, prevents leaders from developing any ethical leadership.

It appears therefore that leaders whose ethical leadership is incomplete or underdeveloped work either in very hierarchical organizations where decisional power is centralized, or in organizations where they are left to fend for themselves. Consequently, some seem not to have the power to act or react when faced with situations that do not fit into the regulatory framework, while others who witness situations that do not seem ethical might be unable to identify the source of their doubts and to take action.

References

Langlois, L. (2013). Ethical sensitivity unfolding in educational settings. In B. J. Irby, G. Brown, R. Lara-Alecio, & S. Jackson (Eds.) The Handbook of Educational Theories. Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 821-829.

Langlois, L. and Lapointe, C. (2007). Ethical leadership in Canadian school organizations:Tensions and possibilities, *Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership*, *35*(2), 247-260.

Langlois, L., Lapointe, C., Valois, P. & De Leeuw, A. (2014). Development and Validity of the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire, *Journal of Educational Administration, 52*(3), 310 – 331.

Starratt, R. J. (1991). Building an ethical school: A theory for practice in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 27*(2), 185-202.

Trevino, L.K. & Nelson, K.A. (2007). *Managing Business Ethics, Straight talk about how to do it right, Fifth Edition*. Hoboken, N: Wiley.