The Journey of a Charismatic Leader: From Principal to Principal Change Agent

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The purpose of this study was to describe the journey of an educational leader in several different contexts. An intrinsic case study was used to examine the development and evolution of this leader as he moved from school principal to deputy superintendent for Bronx small schools to deputy superintendent for one of 10 New York City restructured school regions. Theories of charismatic and constructivist leadership proved effective in describing the style of this particular leader. It was suggested that the effects of context change on leadership practices need to be incorporated into current leadership theory.

This study describes the journey of Mr. N, whom we first met as a school principal and who assumed the position of Chief Executive Officer of School Reform for the New York City Department of Education in 2004, the principal change agent for over 1,200 schools and over 1,000,000 children. Our original study of leader-school relations had its origin in interviews and visits with the principal of a unique alternative school. When the principal took on the position of deputy superintendent for Bronx small schools, we wanted to see how he transposed his site-based learning community beliefs to a larger context and how the new small schools functioned with this leadership. Within a year of Mr. N's promotion, Chancellor Klein of the newly formed Department of Education turned the system upside down. The principal landed right side up as the deputy superintendent for a region of 112 schools, many of them failing. Less than 9 months later, this educator's reform initiatives in the Bronx propelled him to an appointment on the central leadership team of the New York City Department of Education.

Rather than continuing to focus primarily on the relations between the deputy superintendent and the small school reform, our original intention, we decided to examine and analyze the journey of this leader from principal to principle change agent.

Research Method

We conceptualized this project as an intrinsic case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1988), where the primary goal is a better understanding of the particular case. We sought to examine the development and evolution of Mr. N's approach to leadership as the contexts changed from principal

to deputy superintendent for Bronx small schools and then to deputy superintendent for a region of 112 schools. Yin and Campbell (2002) distinguished the case study from other research strategies as optimal when one investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and one in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

The mode of inquiry in our study was qualitative, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (1988). We were intent on capturing the individual's point of view through detailed interviewing and observation. We wanted a case-based position that examined the constraints of the particular contexts, and we sought to secure rich description. Kvale's (1996) conception of life world interviews fit with our view that conversations with Mr. N and with key district and school personnel would provide an understanding of the beliefs and chosen strategies that underscored his leadership. We used semistructured interviews (Kvale) to interview all participants; including district personnel, principals, assistant principals, and teachers. To maintain anonymity, we identified participants only by whether they were district personnel, principals, or teachers. The exception to this was Mr. N who chose to have his identity revealed. The authors' professional relationship with the schools permitted additional interviews, numerous site visits, and the collection of written information about the programs.

The methodology we employed was characteristic of qualitative research as described by Merriam (1997) and others: we were observers and/or participant observers, we used a small sample of interviewees, our data were not described numerically, and we used multiple examples and quotations in reporting our findings. As our study proceeded, we interwove data collection and analysis using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that allowed us to clarify where the data fit with and departed from current theoretical constructs about leadership.

Typically, we carried out individual, one-on-one interviews with participants; transcribed the interviews verbatim; and checked them for accuracy. The texts were read and reread a minimum of three times by each researcher with the goal of identifying categories and recurring themes. Unstructured questions, which arose during the interviews and from the constant comparative analysis of other interviews, clarified the basis for the patterns that emerged.

We employed triangulation procedures to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation of data and to clarify the meaning of our interviews and observations. While multiple data sources (including interviews, observations, and data documents) were used for triangulation (Merriam, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), findings reported are primarily from interviews. Documents provided supplemental information and included district strategic plans, policies, descriptions of district and site initiatives, and curriculum information. The depth and variety of the data collection procedures that we adopted support the validity of the findings and conclusions.

The Case

The First Leg of the Journey: International High School

Mr. N, a teacher and then English as a Second Language (ESL) specialist at the New York City Board of Education, was the founding principal of the International High School (IHS) at LaGuardia Community College in 1985. His goal was to create a school environment where newly arrived high-school age immigrants could succeed and flourish in high school, college, and beyond. The road that Mr. N and his colleagues traveled on the first leg of their journey was paved with professional development built into every facet of the school's work. The central belief that emerged was student empowerment through the professional development of teachers (Nadelstern, Price, & Listhaus, 2000).

Located on the basement floor of LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, Queens, New York, IHS was a joint venture of the then New York City Board of Education and the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York. An alternative high school created to serve the needs of students with limited English proficiency, it describes itself as "alternative in its admissions policy, population served, school governance, teaching methodology, setting, and opportunities for both students and staff" (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000, p. 138).

In an interview with Mr. N (January 17, 1999), he reflected back on the first years of the school:

> It was less about trying to figure out how to structure a school than trying to figure out how kids learn best and, through our discoveries, figuring out what a school would need to look like if it were built around our understanding about how kids learn best and in a way that allowed us to continue that level of inquiry, and then designing the school based on new learning.

> Given that, it's not surprising that the first year we opened our school looked not too dissimilar from a traditional New York City public high school. We divided all knowledge into the same six arbitrary disciplines everyone else has been confined to for centuries. Periods were exactly 40 minutes long; we had eight of them a day. We made the mistake of thinking that if eight periods were good, nine must be better. So, going into the second year, we shaved 5 minutes off each instructional period and that gave an additional class. The staff did meet together for 2 hours a week. Back then, it was as a paid-per-session after school activity. Since it was part and parcel of working here, it wasn't necessarily voluntary, although no one was forced to be here. We shared our insights on this common exploration about learning. And, on the basis of those insights, we continued to rethink the way the school needed to be structured.

Mr. N noted that the "Student for a Day" project was a turning point in the school's development. He described this venture as follows:

> Everyone on staff was given the opportunity to be relieved of responsibilities, teaching and otherwise, for an entire school day, to spend a day with a kid. The staff member was to travel through the school as that kid did and attempt to see the school from the student's perspective.

> Over a 3 month period, everyone on staff volunteered for this exercise. We facilitated the shadowing opportunity by covering their classes. At the end of the experiment, we got together and shared our findings. In discussion, comments surfaced like, "The most interesting thing that happens in this school happens in the hallway in-between classes," or, "35-minute periods a day are insane. You can't do anything meaningful in 35 minutes, and to have to shift your focus every half hour is a crazy way of learning something."

The ensuing discussions led to a restructuring of the school based on the 70 minute periods of LaGuardia Community College. Mr. N created a 2 hour block on Wednesday afternoons for the staff to meet. During that time, students had the option of staying at the school; the computer room was open, athletic and club activities were offered, and students could participate in college activities. In describing this restructuring, Mr. N related that:

> The key is that the staff meets together to identify their successes, failures, and kids' problems. As the staff learns what it isn't doing, the students learn from the staff's experience of trying to meet the kids' needs through inquiry. A principle emerged: Teachers best offer learning experiences for students that they experience first

themselves. Therefore, peer assessment for children developed only after the teachers did it themselves.

Mr. N described how the peer assessment itself grew out of a small school necessity:

I realized that because of my small administrative staff, I needed to share responsibility. I was working a 70 hour week, 7 days a week. So, I started with personnel. I asked teachers if they wanted to participate in hiring. Prior to opening the school, I had interviewed 60 people for seven positions with each interview lasting 2 hours. In our first year, all seven staff members agreed to join the personnel committee and decided on a chair.

He went on to describe the organic development of the personnel committee and peer review:

Having hired most of the staff, they had a vested interest in their hires becoming successful. The underlying assumption is that when staffing is a shared activity, the entire faculty accepts responsibility for orienting and supporting new members. Thus, the third year, the staff initiated peer support during the Wednesday afternoon meetings. Initially, peer support took place on Wednesdays without involving evaluation. Once the faculty became accustomed to providing support, they began visiting each other's classes. As the observations increased, some written feedback began. Trust had to be built, and it took time. Providing written feedback to each other did not become widespread until the fourth year. And, it wasn't until the fifth year that the personnel committee wrote and codified the schema for evaluation. Based on research showing that ideas from colleagues carry more weight than traditional evaluation procedures, the committee members concluded that a combination of self-evaluation and peer evaluation would be the most effective means to promote professional growth. By that time, my role was to meet weekly with the chair of the committee. The message to the faculty is that they are autonomous professionals who are trusted. The key to consensus in the school is that it is the faculty that shapes policy.

Over the last few years, the staff has evolved into instructional teams that have become increasingly autonomous and have taken on more and more responsibilities. They schedule themselves for free periods, and they do their own hiring. These instructional groups have replaced the peer groups. The personnel committee has taken on more of a coordinating function. A coordinating committee oversees governance. I am a member of the coordinating committee and create my own portfolio that my peer group evaluates.

At the time of the interview, Mr. N (personal communication, January 17, 1999) saw his own leadership role as threefold. First, he felt that his job was to model professional development, as in the portfolio that he created for his own assessment. Second, he considered that training his staff to be leaders was one of his central roles. And third, a major piece of his responsibility was an external one to protect and advocate for his school. In that role of advocate and liaison to the outside, he promoted the creation of an in-house, unpublished handbook titled *Personnel Procedures for Peer Selection, Support, and Evaluation* (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000).

The seeds for the model of systemic change through professional development that Mr. N had developed are found in IHS' professional development structure. The interdisciplinary team is the basic unit for professional development. The faculty and student body are organized into six interdisciplinary teams composed of a math, science, English, and social studies teacher and a support services coordinator. For a full year, the team is jointly responsible for a heterogeneous

group of about 75 9th through 12th grade students who share a theme-based academic program as well as affective and academic counseling.

The Coordinating Council; that includes administrators, student government and parent association representatives, the union chapter chair leader, and a representative from each interdisciplinary team; is the policy-setting body for the school. Day-to-day school management and Coordinating Council meeting agendas are the responsibility of a steering committee comprised of the principal, assistant principals, and two elected teacher representatives. Other school-wide committees have specific charges: the Curriculum and Assessment Committee oversees the performance-based assessment practices and aligns curriculum and assessment standards across instructional teams. The Personnel Committee determines faculty hiring and evaluation procedures. These committees contribute the topics for the professional development at the monthly faculty meetings.

The school's peer review policy sums up best the school-wide philosophy:
Shared leadership in a high school can foster the professional growth and development of teachers, leading to the empowerment of students as successful learners. . . . If we view ourselves as true educators, we must also view ourselves as learners. . . . If we model self-improvement in an atmosphere of sharing that is what our students will learn. (IHS, 2000, p. 6)

The Second Leg of the Journey: The Bronx Small Schools Initiative

After 10 years at IHS, Mr. N determined that the school could continue functioning effectively without his personal leadership. He decided to accept an offer from New Visions for Public Schools, a not-for-profit intermediary that manages funds and professional development support to New York City Schools. He was to oversee the creation and support of new small schools for which New Visions managed the funding. When the New York City Board of Education policy environment changed under a new chancellor, Mr. N felt unable to support and effectively protect the schools for which he was responsible. Consequently, he returned to IHS which became, albeit briefly, one of the first New York City charter schools.

Under the New York State standards movement that required all students to receive a regents diploma, IHS faced a new challenge. Mr. N fostered the creation of a unique environment in which student achievement was very high**.** Annually, 92%-95% of graduates apply and are accepted to college, 67% to 4-year colleges. In another analysis, 20.0% of students graduate as a factor of total enrollment, as compared with 20.4% at Bronx High School of Science (an entrance exam high school). In 1996, 72% of students who entered in 1992 graduated in 4 years; in New York City, typically 42% of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students graduate after 4 years (Nadelstern et al., 2000).

High student achievement had previously reduced the overt city and state challenges to many of the alternative practices. But this time, New York State Commissioner Mills would not budge on the regents exams. A group of high performing alternative high schools brought two lawsuits against the commissioner that were resoundingly defeated. Mr. N recounted that, at one point, the school was within a hair's breadth of being disbanded. When these pressures lessened and the school "was back to a place where I felt I had fulfilled my obligations" (personal communication, February 18, 2004), Mr. N decided to take his vision to a larger context.

During the 1990s, two successful spin-offs of IHS had been created in New York City, one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn. In 2000, the head of a not-for-profit group called

Replications approached Mr. N about starting an IHS in the Bronx. Mr. N agreed, as long as he could hire the staff. After unsuccessfully trying to connect with various possible sponsors, he decided to meet with the struggling Bronx High School office that at the least possessed the potential real estate. At that juncture, barely 4 out of 10 students were graduating from the Bronx High Schools. The Central Board had just taken over two high schools. Others had previously been put under Central control. The superintendent of Bronx High Schools did not have a well developed strategy or plan for improvement. As conversations proceeded, Mr. N was simultaneously talking with the head of New Visions for Public Schools. During a meeting with the embattled Bronx High School Superintendent, Mr. N and the Director of New Visions for Public Schools discussed their idea of creating more and more small schools within the poorly functioning large high schools as a strategy for school reform. They felt that the future of Bronx high schools depended on the superintendent's ability to embrace this idea, and he did.

Appointed as member of an advisory committee for this small schools project, Mr. N served on a consultant basis and, at the same time, worked towards the opening of the Bronx IHS in 2002. In late August 2001, the Bronx High Schools Deputy Superintendent for Operations retired, and the superintendent asked Mr. N to become Deputy Superintendent for New and Small Schools. What intrigued Mr. N was the superintendent's decision to relegate operations to a lower level in the hierarchy and raise to a higher level the instructional deputy for new and small schools. Most important was the realization that "here was an opportunity to get at the most intractable issue facing urban public education, that is, how do you restructure a district office so that it not only can create new small schools but support and nurture them?" (Mr. N, personal communication, August 12, 2002).

In September 2001, two orientation sessions in a Bronx high school auditorium attracted 400 interested people. The invitation was to reimagine high school for themselves and the students of the borough. The participants formed dozens of planning teams. By January 15, 2002, 30 full-blown school proposals had been submitted. New Visions for Public Schools decided to provide $7,000,000 to support 19 small schools to open in September 2002 and 2003.

Mr. N then recounted that during a weekly series of seminars in a high school auditorium, the teams found each other. The only requirements were that the teams had to include school people, parents, and students and be affiliated with a community organization. He told the participants:

> Beyond that, form any kind of team you want, and give us your best ideas. And, week after week, we helped them work through some of the ideas. So, if you look through the agenda items, it started with creating a school mission and philosophy; it moved to curriculum and instruction, to assessment, to recruitment, putting together a faculty. (personal communication, August 12, 2002)

At that point in the interview, the conversation turned to a new agenda: restructuring the whole district. He explained:

> This office is structured exactly to have the schools we currently have in the Bronx: large departments that are responsible [for a] small piece of each school but accountable for nothing. So, if you say there are 100 people who work in Bronx high schools in this building and if you say to any one of them, "how many schools are you responsible for?" they say, "all of them." Then you say, "What are you really accountable for?" And, you get quizzical looks back, because the truth is that there is no accountability. (personal communication, August 12, 2002)

Mr. N proposed to the then superintendent to use the small school model for the district organization: small interdisciplinary teams responsible for a small number of schools.

> Instead of an office of instruction, an office of operations, an office of guidance, an office of special ed., an office of technology; you've got cross-departmental teams responsible not for a small part of 21 schools, but for the entirety of 4 or 5 schools. The trick over time is to turn staff meetings into a professional development opportunity for people who work in the district office so that the work is not, doesn't start with us and move toward the schools. It's creating opportunities for schools to learn from each other within each school and across schools. And, our job is really to facilitate that process. . . . In an ideal world, there would be no superintendent's office; there would just be schools. And, what this would be, would be whatever the school [they] couldn't do for themselves. . . . It's actually not dissimilar to what we did at IHS. (personal communication, August 12, 2002)

The conversation had come full circle. The philosophy underlying IHS was to be the basis for the redesign of the Bronx high schools. Mr. N returned to the idea that

> Education ought to be about empowering kids, and you can't empower kids until first you empower the people who work with them. . . . The governing structure of a school needs to be identical to the instructional program that teachers implement with kids. In a school where you have a principal in a front office making policy by memorandum, then there is a kind of cognitive symmetry to having a teacher in front of every classroom telling kids what they need to learn. If you want to change that dynamic, then you have to change the dynamic of having the adults interact first. And, until you do, you can't really change the classroom relationships. (personal communication, August 12, 2002)

In his role as Deputy Superintendent for Small Schools, Mr. N had the opportunity to broaden this deep belief about the essential role of modeling to the larger educational context. The vision remained the same. He wondered himself how far it could be stretched out.

> I've actually got a suspicion that if the chancellor were a good kindergarten teacher and, once a month, worked with 40 superintendents in a way that only a good kindergarten teacher could, that the system would be very different. (personal communication, August 12, 2002)

Mr. N sees the role of the leader as creating the opportunity for conversations to take place, intervening in ways that prevent the organizational structure from impeding those conversations, and then changing the nature of the organization so that those interventions are no longer necessary.

We observed clear examples of this type of modeling in their attendance at small school district meetings. On August 20, 2002, as the new small schools within the large high schools approached opening day, Mr. N mentioned that the building principals in whose buildings the small schools would be housed would introduce the small school principals. One principal, in particular, objected. She felt that the new principals were not under these principals and wanted separate introductions. Mr. N listened. One other leader agreed with her, and at least one dissented. No decision was made. One of the researchers was curious about the outcome. It was clear that Mr. N's purpose was the acceptance of the new leaders by building and district principals, no mean feat given the goal of eventually developing multiple small schools in each building to replace the larger school. The resolution incorporated the two principals' objections; the large school principals first introduced the new principals and then each small school principal introduced himself or herself. At another small school principals' meeting in Fall 2002,

Mr. N asked the principals to identify what they would like to share with him or to observe on his visits to their fledging schools. He made it clear that his goal was to support their growth and that they were to define the areas of success and need.

The Third Leg of the Journey: Deputy Superintendent for Region 2

By the 2002-2003 academic year, a new chancellor and regime were in place and the whole New York City public school system was reorganized. One constant remained: the commitment of the new regime and Bill Gates to new small schools. The relatively smooth running of the first year of the new Bronx small schools had the usual consequence for its leader: Mr. N, deputy superintendent for small schools for less than 2 years, was appointed deputy superintendent for 1 of 10 New York City school regions. The newly formed Region 2 comprised three former Bronx community school districts. The restructuring enabled the new deputy superintendent to try to implement the district office vision that had been percolating for at least 2 years.

The new New York City system wide structure consisted of 10 K-12 regions; each headed by a regional superintendent, a deputy superintendent, and 10-12 local instructional superintendents assigned to 10-12 schools. This structure facilitated the realization of Mr. N's vision, allowing Region 2 to create what they call a three-tiered model that mirrors the IHS structure. As previously mentioned, the IHS organization consisted of small interdisciplinary instructional teams in charge of all facets of a group of students' school lives over a period of a year. The Coordinating Council, the second tier, acted as the policy-setting body for the school. The third tier was a steering committee comprised of the principal, assistant principals, and two elected teacher representatives whose responsibility was day-to-day school management.

The Region 2 three-tiered model, similar to that of IHS, was a vertical structure as contrasted with the traditional horizontal structure. As Mr. N said, district specialists had been responsible for all and accountable to no one. Tier III were the School Professional Network Leadership Teams comprised of the principal, assistant principals, instructional coaches, the teacher who runs the union (UFT) teachers' center, teachers, parents, and students. The primary charge of Tier III teams was to build learning communities through professional development. Tier II was the Region's Network Professional Development Group that included a representative from each school in the network. These groups of 10 or 11 included two or three principals, assistant principals, coaches or UFT members, professional development providers, and teachers. The primary goal of these groups was to focus and guide the professional development work of the Tier III teams. The Tier I teams for each network was composed of the local instructional superintendent, the regional instructional supervisor, two instructional support specialists, an English language learner specialist, and other technology or arts specialists. These teams helped form Tier II and Tier III teams and support, collaborate with, and oversee their work. Mr. N noted that the intent was to form instructional teams that worked with groups of schools so that regional instructional specialists and principals were not talking to each other.

This model was his response to the question: how do you organize a region around principles who you know are effective in schools? When asked how he translated this into reality, he responded, "I am creating opportunities: adult education" (personal communication, January 19, 2004). He noted that "last year, my 'class' was the principals; and this year, it's the superintendents" (personal communication, January 19, 2004). The question remained, he

admitted, whether it could have an impact on what goes on in school classrooms. It remains a theoretical construct that he believed could work but lacked proof thereof.

When asked how the new structure was working, Mr. N said that they had created the best possible framework given the limits of resources. One big limitation of the citywide reform was that it separated resources and authority from responsibility and accountability. The previous year, the small schools in the district had resources, authority, accountability, and responsibility. That year, he had neither the resources nor authority to order a cell phone. 'The regions have no money; it goes straight to the schools. The advantage is that they didn't cut money from the schools when they reorganized" (personal communication, January 19, 2004).

The new Region 2 deputy superintendent expressed two sources of frustration: (a) the separation of resources and authority from responsibility and accountability and (b) working with some staff not used to having a voice. He found getting them to talk a biweekly battle. Presently, he identified only four local instructional superintendents as instructional leaders.

An administrator we interviewed spoke candidly about ramifications of this clash of cultures:

> [He has] enormous responsibility, not just in this region; because he has enormous understanding, New Visions and others rely on him for advice. He is opposed to a bureaucracy that doesn't want to change, and it takes a toll. There are a number of people now who see him as their enemy because he has the knowledge and commitment to make it happen; and, if they block him, they can block the movement. (Regional administrator, personal communication, January 19, 2004)

We had heard second hand that Mr. N's leadership style seemed different in the new position. We asked an interviewee his or her perceptions:

> I've never met with a quicker or more creative mind. He is completely knowledgeable. He is the person to go to when you need a creative solution. He is demanding, intolerant of mistakes, and people hear that and react to that as well. He was demanding at International but allowed a decentralization of responsibilities – gave and evolved power for teams even though he was demanding. He allowed people to exercise authority and held them accountable. He has tried to do that here, but it's been more difficult. He has had to exercise greater authority, and more people have experienced that here. (Regional administrator, personal communication, January 19, 2004)

This administrator explained that this intolerance emanated in part from Mr. N having taken on the responsibility of holding people accountable. In the new regional structure, the superintendent and the deputy are accountable for turning around 116 of the lowest performing schools in New York City.

The theme of accountability repeated itself frequently in all the interviews. One of the interviewers commented to an interviewee that, until recently, the term *accountability* did not seem to be a part of the alternative school vocabulary and was not mentioned at IHS. The response was, "That's why often kids did not succeed academically [in the alternative schools]. . . . [At IHS,] you had leadership that demanded accountability without calling it that" (Regional administrator, personal communication, January 19, 2004).We also asked this administrator if it was possible to maintain an empowering leadership style in a larger context. The response was:

> Probably not entirely. Ultimately, it will become possible when people accept their own responsibilities and accept accountability. Then you don't need to be as directive (nor should you); and, at that point, people can be held accountable. . . . Mr. N tries all the time to have a different approach. He tries and says, "You have the opportunity to do this,

and I'm holding you accountable." People generally want direction, and this is a longer educative process than he would like, but it's necessary. (Regional administrator, personal communication, January 19, 2004)

Mr. N talked very frequently about accountability. He felt that the structure of the Department of Education remained in divisions. Everyone was responsible for a small piece of everything, preventing accountability. Also, in the past, only kids were accountable. He hoped that useful accountability (i.e., adults losing jobs) would result from whether kids were succeeding or not. In a recent phone interview (February 12, 2004), he reiterated his belief that adults, not kids, should be held accountable. Schools should be opened and closed with greater frequency. Energy belonged in the creation of school cultures that do not tolerate kids not achieving. The three-tiered system created in Region 2 focused accountability on the network, not the individual school.

At the end of our January 19, 2004 interview with Mr. N, he shared the news that he had been promoted to the position of CEO of the Office for School Reform for the New York City Department of Education. He was to leave Region 2 in the spring. One of the researchers asked him what would be the effect of being even further removed from what goes on in schools and in the classroom. He responded that the only thing that changed for him was the class level; regional superintendents would be the learners in his new classroom. He concluded the interview with the following comment: "So far, vision has driven me, and reality has driven me from places where I couldn't realize the vision."

Discussion

In the course of studying another school district (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005), we found that the organizational change literature only partially represented what was going on in that district. The leadership literature helped us describe the characteristics of the district's superintendent whose personality appeared to dominate above all else. In our current study, we used theoretical views on charismatic and constructivist leadership to focus on the role of Mr. N in three different contexts and were better able to illustrate his relationships with district and school personnel.

Mr. N as a Charismatic Leader

To help explain some of the salient aspects of Mr. N's leadership, we used Conger and Kanungo's (1998) attribution model of charismatic leadership with its focus on the behavioral characteristics attributed by members of an organization to those in a leadership position. In explaining their model, Conger and Kanungo distinguished charismatic from transformational leadership in terms of the perspective of leadership that is used. Transformational theories typically concern themselves with follower and/or organizational outcomes (e.g. Chemers & Ayman, 1993), while charismatic theories look at leadership from the standpoint of perceived leader behavior. Our primary goal in this intrinsic case study was to better understand the progression and evolution of Mr. N's approach to leadership as the contexts changed. Charismatic leadership theory, with its focus on leader behavior, provided a conceptual framework to understand the behaviors observed and ascribed to this particular leader in the three different contexts described. The Conger-Kanungo model conceptualizes a charismatic leader as being predominantly concerned with influencing organizational members to accept and

own a vision and to work together towards its attainment. This process is broadly conceptualized as a three stage model that includes (a) an initial stage (stage 1) where the leader critically evaluates the existing context, noting deficiencies; (b) stage 2, where goals are formulated and articulated; and (c) stage 3, where the vision is implemented through innovative and unconventional means, where the leader influences and empowers organizational members.

   Stage 1: Evaluating context. In the initial stage, in order to be successful, charismatic leaders need to have the knowledge, experience, and expertise to correctly assess the environment in terms of resources and constraints. According to Conger and Kanungo (1998), what distinguishes charismatic from noncharismatic leaders in this initial stage is the ability to recognize deficiencies in the present context. Reform efforts in the three contexts where Mr. N had a major leadership role reflected Mr. N's ongoing analysis and assessment of each context. As principal of IHS, and later as deputy superintendent of the Bronx small schools, experimentation and evaluation of innovations were built into the system so that changes, where needed, could be implemented. Lengthening the school periods from 35 to 70 minutes at IHS after faculty immersed themselves in students' schedules exemplified this dynamic change process. In a larger context, Mr. N's ability to recognize the need for systematic school reform in the Bronx and his successful approach in promoting the small schools initiative embodied a key behavioral component of a charismatic leader: the ability to recognize and take advantage of opportunity.
   When questioned about curriculum reforms in the Bronx region, Mr. N attributed the lack of a regional vision as the impetus for his point of entry curricular model:

   I was perplexed and annoyed at the start. No one explained the underlying theory. . . . I was forced to focus on underlying theory, and [this] resulted in the point of entry format. . . . It did cause me to think about how kids learn and plan for that learning. (personal communication, January 19, 2004)

   Stage 2: The future vision. This emphasis on future vision, or the demonstration of a strategic vision or an idealized future goal, is often used to differentiate charismatic leaders from others (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Conger, 1988; House, 1995). Bolman and Deal (1991) described an approach to leadership that they called symbolic, similar to conceptions of visionary and transformational leadership described by others (Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 1994) in its emphasis on future challenges. A symbolic leader is a "creator of possibilities" (Bolman & Heller, 1995, p. 317). Instead of being concerned with only immediate tasks, a symbolic leader represents a distant improved future and provides followers with a rationale for their work. While a vision of the future may be drawn up collaboratively, the symbolic leader has the task of articulating the vision in a compelling way. Finally, symbolism gives meaning to the task and provides a way of demonstrating the new approach and inspiring and giving confidence to organization members.
   In describing his vision of leadership, his role as leader, and his ideas about sound teaching and learning; Mr. N was knowledgeable and highly articulate. Central to his philosophy was the notion that at each level of leadership, organizational members modeled the learning process for the level below. This philosophy is an application of Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory which uses modeling as a key factor in the ability of learners to reach their zone of proximal development. A principal, for example, models in his interactions with teachers the relationships that they, in turn, should develop with their students (Nadelstern et al., 2000). Building a community of learners who share leadership is one of the key steps in fostering

professional growth. An example of this was evident in IHS' teacher-created peer review policy that states: "If we model self-improvement in an atmosphere of sharing, that is what our students will learn" (IHS, 2000, p. 6).

Stage 3: Implementing the vision. When implementing change, charismatic leaders empower their followers with the use of three kinds of behavioral strategies: a visioning strategy that strengthens the group's commitment, a context-changing strategy that involves changing those contextual conditions that make followers feel powerless, and a self-efficacy information strategy where the leader is engaged in practices that strengthen followers' beliefs in their own capabilities (Conger & Kanungo, 1998).

Conger and Kanungo's (1998) empowerment strategies can be applied to the beliefs described by Mr. N and attributed to him by interviewees. Mr. N's visioning strategy had as its goal empowering students through the professional development and support of teachers. Glanz and Behar-Horenstein (2000) described the strategies Mr. N used in his role as principal of IHS: he focused on teaching and learning, built a powerful community of leaders and learners, modeled in interactions with teachers the kind of relationships they should build with students, developed a collegial vision and purpose, served as a resource for solving problems and implementing new programs, focused faculty on their growth and development as well as that of their students, evaluated new initiatives in relation to student learning outcomes, communicated the mission and philosophy of the school to internal and external audiences, and enlisted a broad base of political and financial support for ongoing experimentation and innovation.

As high school principal and deputy superintendent of small schools and, where possible, as deputy superintendent of a Bronx region, Mr. N encouraged school and district staff to develop their own goals and strategies. In the first two contexts, new schools were created by empowered group members working together to develop their own unique approaches. These contexts contrasted with the Bronx regional staff who were working within a citywide reform movement that had been imposed upon them with no available resources to support their efforts. Implementing a model they did not create, working in teams where collaboration was imposed, rendered the reorganization effort more difficult.

Mr. N's context-changing strategy, the three-tiered model, supports research findings indicating that charismatic leaders show an expertise in devising effective but unconventional strategies and plans of action. This model was based on a vertical structure developed at IHS. The key purpose of each tier team was to build a learning community that could support and model behavior for the tier below. This kind of vertical structure was also implemented with the three-tiered model introduced as part of the development of the Bronx small schools. Mr. N used the same idea again in his proposal for restructuring the Bronx region, where he dramatically reduced the number of schools that were the responsibility of cross-departmental teams and made the teams responsible for everything about their schools. This strategy created opportunities for adult collaboration and learning and supported learners who were teachers, principals, or regional staff. The principal difference between IHS, the Bronx small schools, and regional initiatives was that in the first two contexts, staff was hired who had bought into the initiatives. In the region, some of the staff were inherited from the former districts and were resistant to the reforms.

In highlighting the importance of context-changing attributed to charismatic leaders, Conger and Kanungo (1988) discussed organizational, supervisory, reward system, and job design context factors that create feelings of powerlessness among members. These

organizations are characterized as impersonal and bureaucratic, having authoritarian supervisors. Often the allocation of resources and awards in these organizations seems arbitrary, and jobs provide little challenge and meaning for members. In contrast, charismatic leaders are skillful at sensing organizational conditions that contribute to a sense of powerlessness and understand how to change the context to empower group members. As the organizational leader, Mr. N clearly empowered IHS members and Bronx small school staff. In both these contexts, members had substantial control over their environment; creating a culture that valued shared information, participation, and feedback. At small school district meetings, Mr. N often modeled the kind of collaborative learning he wanted to foster in group members. Typically, he would introduce an issue and then step back and have the group communicate and find their own solutions. Creating a similarly empowering context in the Bronx region proved more difficult due to a lack of necessary resources and regional staff who resisted the new structure and did not effectively communicate.

A self-efficacy information strategy is one that involves the leader in practices that strengthen members' beliefs in their own capabilities. For Mr. N, this was accomplished by modeling professional development, training his staff to be leaders in their own right, and advocating for staff members. Bandura (1986) and Conger and Kanungo (1998) discussed the impact of modeling behavior on the efficacy expectations of the observer. In each context, Mr. N's initiative, unconventional tactics, risk-taking behavior, and demonstrated dedication to the cause provided vicarious empowering experiences for group members. Examples of this include the unconventional structure that characterized IHS, its principal's efforts to keep bureaucracy from interfering with learning (e.g., his support in the lawsuits against the commissioner's regents exams requirement), and his portfolio for his personal self-assessment. His dedication to his vision of learning, which remained constant in different contexts, also served as a model of self-efficacy.

The literature on charismatic leadership has differentiated positive characteristics of charisma from negative aspects (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House & Howell, 1992; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996). Often, charismatic leaders are more adept at innovation than administration. Associated with a charismatic personality are certain character flaws including narcissism and self-importance. House and Howell proposed the terms *socialized* and *personalized* charismatics to distinguish between positive and negative forms of charisma. Personalized charisma is associated with a high need for power, high authoritarianism, narcissism, an external locus of control, and low self-esteem. In contrast, socialized charismatics are characterized as having an internal locus of control, high self-esteem, low authoritarianism, and the tendency to govern others through egalitarian means. Mr. N is conspicuously and consistently high on the characteristics associated with socialized charisma. In his dealings with staff, he consistently used strategies to empower rather than control. The only area where a growing need for power emerged was in his unflagging belief in the need to disseminate his vision.

Mr. N as a Constructivist Leader

Constructivist beliefs about learning are at the core of Mr. N's vision of leadership. Walker (2003) outlined principles of constructivism including that knowledge and beliefs are actively formed within the learner, meaning is constructed by the learner, learning is a social activity enhanced by shared inquiry, and reflection and metacognition are essential aspects of constructing knowledge. A constructivist leader models these principles.

For M. D. Lambert and Gartner (2003), a constructivist school district can be viewed as an "interdependent learning community, characterized by collaborative group interactions" (p. 172). A constructivist leader in a district whose members are interconnected can be described as a stewart of the vision, values, and purpose of the district; a designer of the enabling structures and processes that support dialogic, inquiring, sustaining, and partnering conversations; a teacher of the board, community, district staff, principals, and leadership teams about teaching, learning, and dimensions of community; a learner with the board, community, district, and schools' staff and students; and a participant in the reciprocal processes that "give texture to the culture of collaborative inquiry that is growing in the school, district and community" (p. 169). A constructivist leader recognizes that roles such as steward, designer, and teacher are multidimensional and are shared by many coleaders.

A constructivist organization, characterized as an interdependent community, supports the needs of its schools and forms connections among the schools and the community. Mr. N's vertical model, implemented through the various shared leadership teams at IHS (the Coordinating Council, the interdisciplinary instructional teams that were in charge of all facets of a particular group of students) and applied using the three-tiered model in the Bronx regional office, created opportunities for collaboration among staff. In a constructivist paradigm like this, teams require time to evolve and are often designed around cycles of inquiry (Shawn, 1994), evident in Mr. N's description of the evolution of the school structure at IHS (Nadelstern et al., 2000). Mr. N described how school staff shadowed students for several months, collaborated about their findings, and subsequently instituted a new school structure based on longer periods. However, making the role changes necessary for collaborative inquiry can occur slowly and encounter resistance (L. Lambert et al., 2003), evident in Mr. N's frustration with implementing his program with regional staff who were used to a bureaucratic structure.

In considering the school district as a constructivist, interdependent learning community; M. D. Lambert and Gardner (2003) underscored the significance of building an authentic accountability system. They viewed the role of a constructivist district as being one that expands both what is assessed and the strategies used to document learning and achievement. This is accomplished by building interdependent learning communities that can resist bureaucratic pressure to dictate assessment and accountability policy and make meaning of federal mandates. District and school staff members become empowered to "fight to keep the curriculum rich and the assessment system authentic" (M. D. Lambert & Gardner, p. 172).

In interviews with Mr. N and with Bronx district and regional staff, the subject of accountability repeatedly recurred. Accountability at IHS was integrated into everything and, therefore, was not a separate focus. Programs were developed and implemented collaboratively, and professional development was centered on cycles of inquiry where the primary focus was on learner outcomes. Accountability, then, was built into the system by school staff. The peer assessment model the staff created exemplified the highest form of professionalism in which staff members, including the leaders, were accountable to each other. Mr. N, in his description of IHS, reported: "Our current overall organization, including our professional development program, is based on our ongoing evaluation of student performance and faculty effectiveness and reflects an evolution over time" (Nadelstern et al., 2000, p. 265-266).

Accountability in the Bronx region was a primary concern for Mr. N and his staff. He felt that the lack of accountability was due to the structure of the Department of Education where everyone was responsible for a small piece of everything but was accountable to no one. In a

phone interview (February 4, 2004), he reiterated his belief that adults rather than kids should be held accountable:

> There is the threat of accountability; but, thus far, I don't see any accountability. In the past, only kids were accountable. No one else is accountable. So, I don't see it. People make mistakes, and I don't see anyone losing their jobs. . . yet. Maybe it'll happen as a result of whether kids are succeeding or not, and that's useful accountability.

In Mr. N's two previous contexts (IHS and the Bronx small schools), authority and accountability were the responsibility of an empowered staff given resources, authority, and responsibility to create, implement, and assess their vision. The Central Department of Education, in contrast with Region 2's reform effort, separated resources and authority from responsibility and accountability. Forced to dismantle bureaucracy by centralizing authority, viewed by Mr. N as an inherent contradiction, he was obliged to take on the responsibility of holding staff accountable to policy that they had not created. The kind of organic accountability that characterized IHS, and more recently the Bronx small schools, was difficult to realize in the Bronx region where policy was imposed and staff, used to a more traditional structure, found themselves overloaded trying to implement a new system with very limited time and resources.

M. D. Lambert and Gardner (2003) proposed the following 13 guiding principles for constructivist school districts:

1. Promote and model the behavior and informed decision-making processes that contribute to students and adults participating effectively in an equitable democracy,
2. Provide resources and collaborate with schools and the community to identify shared values and create compelling visions, mission statements and unifying purposes,
3. Engage in equitable large-scale devolution of authority, resources and responsibilities—all within a coherent district context,
4. Buffer, navigate and mediate between state and national mandates and constructivist principles of learning and leading-advocating for policy change and waivers when needed,
5. Design policies, procedures, and structures that pass the "enabler test" (being congruent with shared values and consistently supportive of teaching and learning),
6. Create personnel policies and practices that nurture the continuous development of all personnel, from recruitment and induction through engagement in varied leadership roles,
7. Collaborate with schools in creating and protecting prime time for professional development and other forms of collaborative and collegial interaction,
8. Develop information and technology systems that support administrative and accountability functions but are designed primarily to facilitate instruction, communication and decision-making,
9. Model and support the collaborative strategies of a learning organization at all levels (classroom, school, district, school board, community),
10. Move beyond condescension and confrontation toward interest-based collaboration in relationships with unions and associations,
11. Establish a comprehensive guidance system that attends to the "protective factors" needed to build resiliency as well as the academic needs of all students,
12. Use assessment and accountability tools and approaches that are congruent with constructivist learning,

13. Encourage well-designed classroom and school-level innovation, collaborate in program assessment and systematically facilitate the scaling-up of promising practices. (p. 188)

The two researchers observed most of these principles in the structures Mr. N set up in the three contexts that were studied. They served to empower all levels of constituents. In each of these contexts, reform efforts created interdependent learning communities where small teams of teachers or administrators were responsible and accountable for manageable numbers of students (teachers or administrators). The focus was on the development of instructional strategies that strengthened student language and literacy. At IHS, staff determined their own course of action that led to student development and empowerment. In the larger reform efforts of Region 2; external influences pressed Mr. N to assume more authority, and the instructional strategies used to promote student development were more defined. In this context, the point of entry instructional model developed by Mr. N delineated the components of a balanced approach to learning. With the need to transform a series of low-performing high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools into successful learning communities; accountability became a major focus, at times subsuming empowerment.

Conclusion

It is clear that the charismatic, constructivist leadership of Mr. N proved effective at IHS and in the Bronx small schools. In both of these contexts, Mr. N was able to attract and recruit staff who either already had a similar educational philosophy or who were willing to develop a shared vision. Thus, learning communities involving all levels developed were supported and protected. As deputy superintendent in the Bronx, Mr. N was obliged to work primarily with inherited staff and was dependent in part on the resource allocations from the central Department of Education. Staff buy-in of initiatives was more difficult, and lack of control over resources limited empowerment. These factors affected Mr. N's leadership.

While theories of charismatic, transformational, and constructivist leadership proved effective in describing Mr. N's leadership style in the first two legs of his journey; they do not address the effects of context change, such as that encountered by Mr. N on the third leg of his journey, on subsequent leadership practices. The theories described in this paper do not directly address the dilemma that Mr. N faced in the Bronx Region, a situation where the leader's vision clashed often overtly with the context.

The perspective of situational leadership theory can be employed to understand leadership practices in different contexts. Situational leadership behavior is conceptualized as an interaction between style and various situational factors (Hersey & Blanchard, 1987; Korten, 1968). In the Hersey and Blanchard model, task and relationship dimensions of leadership behavior are used to describe leadership in different situations, where the situational variable relates to the maturity or developmental level of group members. Ideally, as the members of the group become more knowledgeable and experienced; a leader gradually relinquishes control, becoming less directing and more delegating. The situational approach, then, views leadership as a dynamic process that ideally adapts to context changes. Perhaps Mr. N's frustration with the Bronx regional staff can be attributed to his inability to effectively adapt his democratic, delegating leadership style (that had proved so successful in IHS) to a different context.

Yet, situational leadership theory alone does not leave room for the current focus in the leadership literature on the visionary leader. Vision is the first standard of the National Policy

Board for Educational Administration's (2002) *Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership*. The conceptualizations of leadership and leadership programs need to address what occurs and what needs to occur when vision clashes with the context. No amount of training can prepare a leader for the unexpected. Thus, leadership programs independent from the school system need to provide a critical reflective support group as new leaders are appointed to administrative positions. In the case of Mr. N, his subsequent promotion impedes us from determining how he would have addressed the challenge over the long term.

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