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How Leaders Communicate their Vulnerability: Implications for Trust Building

Abstract

Purpose: The notion of vulnerability underlies relationships of trust. Trust between leaders and staff is needed to solve concerns that hinder equity and excellence in teaching and learning. This paper examines whether and how leaders show vulnerability by disclosing their own possible contributions to concerns they try to resolve.

Methodology: Data included transcripts of conversations held by 27 educational leaders about a concern with another staff and a questionnaire about the nature, causes and history of the concern. Questionnaire analysis identified whether and how leaders described their own possible contribution prior to the conversation. Transcript analysis identified instances of leaders' contribution disclosure.

Findings: Results indicate that while two-thirds of leaders identified an own contribution, when prompted prior to the conversation, one-third saw no own contribution. Leaders indicated contributing by not acting on the concern, by acting in ways inappropriate or insufficient to resolve the concern, or by not clearly communicating their concern in the past. Eight of the 27 leaders publically disclosed their contribution in the actual conversation. In some conversations this disclosure prompted reciprocal disclosure of information about the concern and its causes by the other person, aiding a more effective concern resolution.

Scholarly value: Through examining leaders' interpersonal behavior in difficult conversations, the importance of leaders' acknowledgments of own mistakes and communication of their own vulnerability is highlighted. A positive view of vulnerability is argued for, epistemic vulnerability, which manifests itself in the willingness to be honest and open to learning by accepting one's own fallibility.

Introduction

The notion of vulnerability underlies relationships of trust. In their efforts to resolve barriers to improved educational outcomes, leaders require the trust of others - including teachers and parents. Establishing trust and building collaborative relationships is particularly challenging when leaders need to address concerns about others' behavior or performance (Sinnema, Le Fevre, Robinson, & Pope, 2013). Dealing with such concerns requires leaders to have conversations with those involved, yet leaders generally struggle to have these kinds of conversations effectively (Le Fevre, & Robinson, 2014; Cardno, 2007). Since the quality of such conversations is a powerful determinant of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), understanding which specific interpersonal practices make difficult conversations more effective is important.

Trust and Trust-building Behavior

Trust is crucial in many different levels of society including individual, interpersonal, and organizational. Researchers in sociology and psychology have recognized the importance of trust for decades and distinguish three different ideas: trustworthiness, trust propensity and trust (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Franzese, 2013; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trustworthiness is a judgment of another person on the basis of perceived personal qualities and observed behaviors. We deem others trustworthy on the basis of their demonstration of benevolence, integrity, and reliability. Perceived trustworthiness of others creates trust propensity, which is the dispositional willingness to rely on and ultimately trust others. Trust propensity involves feelings of vulnerability as even if we consider others as truthful and reliable, we can never be completely sure of their future reaction or behavior towards us. Trust propensity is evident

when the possible negative consequences of others' reactions outweigh the possible benefit gained from the relationship. Trust encompasses the interrelationship of trust propensity and trustworthiness. This research focusses on the notion of trust as a willingness to be vulnerable to another person's actions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998).

While the literature offers many broad determinants of trust such as benevolence, competence, honesty, openness, respect, integrity and authenticity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2004), less is known about the specific interpersonal practices leaders might engage in to build relational trust in interactions with others (Sasaki & Marsh, 2012). Tschannen-Moran (2004) provides behavioral indicators for two determinants of trust - openness and honesty. These behavioral indicators include telling the truth, accepting responsibility, avoiding manipulation (through withholding information), and sharing information and power. Others describe the same behaviors under the concepts of integrity or authenticity and show their importance in building trust in situations where followers are highly vulnerable (Lapidot, Kark & Shamir, 2007; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). To be honest and open means to accept responsibility and expose one's own mistakes or weaknesses, in other words, to show vulnerability. This is a challenge for leaders who often prefer to be seen as in control, infallible and invulnerable (Argyris, 1978). It is this notion of vulnerability that underlies relationships of trust.

For example, a teacher might demonstrate trust in her colleague by admitting mistakes in administering achievement tests the previous day. The teacher's behavior makes her vulnerable, since she cannot control her colleague's reaction. The colleague might use the information against her, in which case she could face negative consequences in her

employment. On the other hand, the benefit of such disclosure could be the advice and support of her colleague in how to better organize further tests for her students.

Conversations addressing other's behavior or performance are difficult for leaders as they often address concerns with a personal nature which can engender feelings of threat or embarrassment or other negative emotions. Hence, the reaction of the person 'under scrutiny' relies even more on the other's perceived trustworthiness than it would with a less personal concern (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Bunker, 1997). If the leader is perceived as trustworthy the situation could offer the opportunity for a fruitful and constructive discussion to resolve the problem collaboratively. However, if the opposite is the case, the conversation could be marked by defensiveness and it is unlikely the problem will be resolved effectively. It seems trust matters most in situations where there is the potential for conflict. Yamagishi (2011, p. 11) refers to this as the paradox of trust. When it is most difficult to trust, trust is needed the most to establish and sustain cooperative and effective relationships (see also Lapidot et al, 2007).

Given that trust is a human need that evolves out of the initial developmental task of forming a secure attachment and trusting one's primary caregiver (Erikson, 1964), it is not surprising that research examining trust within and between cultural groups and organizations has also confirmed its importance in building relationships across cultures (Saunders, 2010). While trust levels and the relative importance of trust concepts are found to differ across countries, the mechanisms to form and maintain trusting relationships are universal (Kramer, 2010; Saunders, Skinner & Lewicki, 2010). Kramer (2010), investigating conflict resolution from a theoretical perspective in cross-cultural settings, emphasizes the importance of vulnerability of both parties to enable a cooperative process. Parties must be willing to reveal

information regarding their own preferences, concerns, and weaknesses. In the end, trust is a psychological state that, regardless of culture, represents an individual's understanding of their relationship with another party in situations that involve risk or vulnerability (Dirks, & Ferrin, 2001; Lapidot et al., 2007; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004).

Building trust in conversations is complicated when there is a relationship of unequal power as, for example, between leaders and their staff (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Simpson, 2007). Those in power can relieve the tensions created by differential power relationships through specific behavioral practices that signal their trust-building motives (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Whitener et al., 1998). Leaders and those who hold positional power need to model the courage it takes to confront and discuss difficult issues, especially if these can evoke emotional reactions. As Leithwood and Beatty (2008) reason "to invite emotional candor, they [leaders] need to offer it first, conveying their own sense of vulnerability as a basis for mutual understanding" (p. 148).

Positive and Negative Vulnerability

Vulnerability can be seen as both positive and negative (Gilson, 2014; Lasky, 2005). Positive or epistemic vulnerability is manifest in the willingness to be honest and open to learning by accepting our own fallibility, our own condition of not knowing and being wrong. As Gilson (2014) states "epistemic vulnerability is what makes learning, and thus a reduction of ignorance, possible" (p. 93). By recognizing one's own vulnerability, one can take responsibility for one's own actions, be more responsive to others' and share responsibility for concerns and concern resolution more openly. Being able to accept and show vulnerability can be seen as a sign of strength as it signals one's genuine desire to reflect on, inquire into and advocate for one's own position (Argyris, 1990).

Negative feelings of vulnerability are often a reaction to embarrassment and threat and can result in protective or ineffectual behavior (Lasky, 2005). Argyris (1991) describes how a group of experienced consultants faced with performance concerns avoid negative feelings of vulnerability by acting defensively, blaming their bad performance on the client and management without reflecting on their own responsibility in the performance issues. Argyris points to the importance of reflection on the validity of one's own perceptions and assumptions to stop acting defensively in such conversations. Tsoukas (1991) comments on Argyris' article by drawing out its focus on the moral issue of individual responsibility. He highlights that it is "a primarily moral, not just technical, task: to be open to criticism, to be willing to test their claims publicly against evidence, to accept that they too are partly responsible for the problems they are confronted with" (p. 15). The consultants in Argyris' study could turn their negative feelings of vulnerability into an opportunity to reflect on their own actions and responsibilities. This kind of reflective practice is particularly important for organizational leaders; turning their gaze from the responsibility of others to their own responsibilities. Leaders shape the culture of communication and the culture of the organization as a whole. Leaders who explicitly demonstrate their own vulnerability by admitting mistakes, inviting questions and feedback, and responding non-defensively to questions and challenges, reduce defensiveness (Edmondson, 2003, 2004). Leaders' disclosure of their own vulnerability engenders the development of more trusting relationships. Others are more willing to openly share their own thoughts and feelings and provide more accurate, relevant and complete information about concerns than they would do without such disclosure (Edmondson, 2003, 2004; Mayer et al., 1995; Wrightsman, 1974; Zand, 1972). Such reciprocal disclosures not only build relational trust but increase the

chances of effective concern resolution (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Colquitt et al., 2007; Parloff & Handlon, 1964; Zand, 1972).

This Research

This research examines whether and how educational leaders identify and disclose their own vulnerability in conversations aimed at resolving their concern with another person. The conversations that are the basis for this research are held by leaders in their work context and deal with behavior or performance concerns making the issue of trust highly salient. Within their leadership role, leaders can be held partially responsible for the existence or persistence of concerns in their team or organization. The guiding research questions were:

1. How do leaders describe their own possible contribution to a concern when prompted to do so prior to having a conversation with the person involved?
2. Do leaders disclose their possible contribution to the concern during a conversation with the other person involved?
3. What are possible reasons for leaders' non-disclosure?

Method

The current research was situated in the context of a graduate educational leadership course in which leaders were taught to analyze their conversation behavior based on frameworks of interpersonal effectiveness (Argyris, 1978; Argyris & Schön, 1974). Leaders recorded real conversations they conducted with another person who they had a concern with.

Participants

All 41 leaders enrolled in the course were asked to give consent to have their assignment data used for research purposes. Leaders were assured verbally and in writing that their

participation or non-participation would not affect their participation in the course or the grading of their assignment. To further ensure voluntary consent, collection of assignment data and consent forms was handled by a research assistant rather than the lecturer. Data analysis did not begin until students had completed the course and all identifying information had been removed from the data. Thirty leaders consented to the research. However, two leaders did not submit their assignment and one chose a private concern for the conversation. The final sample of 27 leaders, included nine male and 18 females. Most participants were 30–50 years old ($n=21$), with five being younger than 30 years and one older than 50 years. Most were in senior leadership roles in elementary ($n=12$) or high schools ($n=10$) with few working in early childhood education ($n=5$). Roles included principal, deputy principal and head of department. Few participants held middle leadership roles such as dean or year group leader. Participants' experience in the educational sector ranged from 1–5 years ($n=5$), 6–15 years ($n=18$), to over 15 years ($n=4$). Leadership experience varied from less than four years ($n=16$) to more than four years ($n=11$).

Procedure

Leaders were asked to identify a concern they had in their work context with another person and to complete a questionnaire about the nature of their concern (see Appendix A). Participants were given approximately three weeks to seek written consent from the person involved and to audio-record a conversation about their concern. Conversation partners were assured that the purpose was to gather information about the leader's behavior, not their behavior or the conversation content. Leaders were urged to use their typical approach in discussing their concern, as by doing so, they would gain more authentic evidence about their own leadership behavior. These on the job concerns provided an authentic context in which

to examine whether leaders would identify and disclose their own possible contribution to a concern.

Data Sources

Three data sources informed this study. First, leaders' responses to the pre-conversation questionnaire item "Please describe how *you* might have contributed to the concern" (Appendix A) described how they believed they may have contributed to the concern. Leaders' responses to the remaining questions informed the researchers' understanding of the context. Second, each leader transcribed their conversation into a two column template. Leaders' actual speech was entered into the right-hand column (RHC) which enabled us to identify instances in which leaders publicly disclosed their possible contribution to a concern. A third data source was the left-hand column (LHC) of the transcript. Leaders were asked to annotate the transcript with any thoughts and feelings they had during the conversation but did not express at the time; a procedure adapted from Argyris and Schön (1974). All three data sources were used for a thematic analysis examining possible patterns that could offer reasons for leaders' non-disclosure.

Data Analysis

There were three stages of analysis. Firstly, pre-conversation questionnaire responses were analyzed to identify whether and how leaders described their own possible contribution to the concern. Three categories of possible contribution emerged: insufficient or inappropriate monitoring or support, avoidance of discussion of the concern, and unclear communication of concern. If leaders' responses contained references to multiple themes, answers were multi-coded to avoid arbitrary decisions about the main contribution. Since some leaders did not identify an own contribution to the concern, two additional categories

were used: other person/factors caused concern, no contribution from either leader or other person described (see Table A in Appendix 2 for definitions and examples of coding categories). To check reliability of the coding, a second trained coder independently coded the complete data set resulting in a satisfactory inter-coder agreement of .82 (Krippendorff's alpha). The majority of concerns focused on the quality of the other person's teaching, professional behavior or capability. On average, leaders rated their concerns as "very" to "extremely" important to resolve, judged their previous attempts as "minimally effective" and felt "somewhat confident" to do so. Differences in ratings between leaders who did and who did not disclose their contribution were assessed through independent samples t-tests.

The second analysis focused on leaders' conversation transcripts. Through multiple re-reading of transcripts with reference to leaders' questionnaires, the authors identified instances in which leaders did or did not disclose their possible contribution. Inter-coder agreement was tested using five of the twenty-seven transcripts. The units of analysis were 58 speech segments of the leader. Percent agreement was high (96%) with an acceptable Krippendorff's alpha (.78).

In the third analysis, we examined transcripts and questionnaires for possible reasons for leaders' non-disclosure. Themes were examined within and across the group of leaders who did not disclose their contribution, looking for disconfirming evidence in each step of the process. The analysis was an iterative process of examining, re-examining and discussing the identified themes until agreement was reached about their legitimacy. Themes identified were: leaders' negative attributions about others, leaders' avoidance of discussing concern causes and jumping to solution talk, and leaders' desire to stay in control of the conversation.

Having three authors involved in every analysis step allowed us to compare and reflect on interpretations.

Findings

The findings are organized according to each research question. Firstly, we present analyses of whether and how leaders described their possible contribution in the pre-conversation questionnaire. Secondly, we describe if and how leaders communicated their contribution, and thus their vulnerability in their later conversation. Finally, we describe potential reasons for leaders not disclosing their own contribution to the concern.

Prompting Leaders' Responsibility

When prompted prior to their conversation, seventeen of the twenty-seven leaders described an own possible contribution to the concern. Leaders saw themselves as contributing to their unresolved concern in three main ways: 1) insufficient or inappropriate monitoring or support, 2) avoiding addressing the concern, or 3) being imprecise about their beliefs about the existence and nature of the concern when communicating with the other person in the past. Some of the leaders' descriptions included more than one way they might have contributed to the concern, hence in Table 1, which depicts the distribution of coding categories, the numbers of leaders across the types of contributions add to more than twenty-seven.

[Insert Table 1]

One of the most common ways in which leaders reported they had contributed to the concern was through not addressing it.

I have not been very clear or direct about my concerns. I have kept quiet during meetings and I have preferred not to compromise my values and stay in the sidelines, hoping that people will forget and we can move on. [Leader #10, questionnaire]

I could have contributed by not addressing this issue earlier as this has been an issue for [student] for some time and I am addressing it now, almost at the end of the term. [Leader #13, questionnaire]

Nine leaders mentioned they had contributed to the persistence of the concern by giving insufficient or inappropriate support or by not monitoring the other person's work when it would have been appropriate. The following leader was concerned about the professional relationship between a tutor teacher and a provisionally registered teacher (teacher in the process of gaining national certification) for over a year.

I have not given the tutor teacher enough guidance in her role. I need to be more proactive in my role as team leader and monitor more closely the relationship between the provisionally registered teacher and tutor teacher. [Leader #27, questionnaire]

Another leader knew from daily walkthroughs about the behavior problems of two boys in a teacher's classroom for four months. The concern re-surfaced in the context of a decision about the teacher's eligibility for an annual salary increment. The leader described multiple ways in which she should have supported the teacher, but had failed to do so.

I should have insisted on her contacting the parents in the first two weeks of school to address these issues before they started to overwhelm her. I could have also offered to sit in with her during the meeting. I should have done a quality assurance check on her classroom environment before her attestation [annual salary review] so she could have addressed some of the basic concerns that the principal had before her attestation.

[Leader #19, questionnaire]

Four leaders had made previous attempts to resolve their concerns. They described these attempts as ineffective, because they missed the opportunity to clearly communicate the nature or importance of their concern to the other person.

I'm new to the Head of Faculty role. In my initial conversations around my concerns about low levels of achievement I may have gone in too softly and/or pussy footed around without being clear. [Leader #2, questionnaire]

By not making it clear enough in the past about my concerns regarding his destructive behavior [Leader #7, questionnaire]

In contrast to those seventeen leaders, ten leaders did not describe a possible contribution to the concern they sought to resolve. Three leaders described the general situation in which the concern had arisen without considering how they themselves could have contributed. Seven leaders described how the concern was caused directly by the other person involved.

I gave her ideas and supported her by modelling, thinking back she started to rely on me too much rather than taking the initiative. [Leader #26, questionnaire]

We prompted leaders to reflect on their own contribution to a concern they sought to resolve, thinking it might urge them to consider their actions and responsibilities within their formal or informal roles. Despite our written prompt, one-third of the leaders in this study did not describe an own contribution. Two-thirds of leaders, referring to persistent concerns with other staff members, indicated how they had contributed by not acting or acting in ways that were inappropriate or insufficient to resolve the concern, by avoiding addressing the concern, or by being unclear when communicating the concern in the past.

Leaders' Disclosure

Although two-thirds of the leaders in this study described their own contribution after being prompted, only eight leaders disclosed a possible contribution in the later conversation.

One leader had a concern around the perceived low trust of the center manager towards her and other staff members. She attributed the low trust to her own personal attributes.

The very first reason for the manager not trusting me enough is because as the team leader, I am young & I don't have any child of my own... [Leader #9, questionnaire]

Even though the leader had the concern for six months and rated it as extremely important to resolve, in the conversation she openly admits her difficulties in talking to the other person about it.

Sorry I haven't be able to talk to you about this issue because I didn't know how and I didn't have the courage as I have so much respect for you and also ... I just didn't know how. [Leader #9, RHC]

While other leaders also openly admitted their responsibility, two leaders acknowledged their own role indirectly, using 'we' as a pronoun when discussing the concern. For example, leader #25 acknowledged that a student's action plan that he and the teacher had agreed on earlier in the year had a negative impact on the student's behavior.

I kind of blame ourselves because when we put together his action plan we did not anticipate this level of negativity. We did not foresee it happening at all and at the moment we don't have any strategy or plan to address it and I think that it's a disadvantage to [student] if this is allowed to go on longer than it is. [Leader #25, RHC]

Some of the transcripts suggested leaders' disclosure during the conversation prompted reciprocal disclosure, which meant the other person also shared their views about the concern and its causes. As a result, more information was shared about the nature or causes of the concern, which aids the concern resolution efforts. For example, Leader #8 was concerned about a team leader who had noticed inconsistencies in the assessment data of one of the

teachers on her team but was not addressing the issue. After the leader signaled her contribution to the concern, a discussion of possible causes of the inconsistent data ensued. The team leader shared her reasons for avoiding addressing the concern with the teacher on her team – she felt she lacked support from the leader.

***Leader:** I think the concern that I might have is that if we've noticed this last year, if this been a pattern that we have for a long time, I am interested in, how we haven't picked up on it and how we haven't nailed it right at the outset.*

[The conversation focusses on possible causes for the inconsistent data for about two minutes]

***Leader:** We've got to get a balance between checking up on people to make sure everyone is right, but you've got to have that balance so trust needs to exist so that people know that they are professional and they do the right job but also know that there is an accountability aspect that you need to be assured that what they are doing is ok. So I think that is probably what we need to work on in that area.*

***Other:** I just have a slight concern that she..., because I don't have that concern with any of the others, ...that she will come to you and say well M is making me do this and give her evidence and why is she doing that. And so I would need to feel that you would then support me.*

***Leader:** So when you say that do you think I won't support you?*

The teacher discloses a critical cause of her avoidance of dealing with the concern. The leader's unexpressed thoughts "I won't support you? What have I done" (LHC) show her surprise about the new information she has gained. The teacher's disclosure prompts the leader to evaluate the support she has given. The conversation here indicates an open and shared resolution process that might have been supported by the leader's open disclosure which encouraged the teacher to share a critical belief about the leader's behavior.

Another example of how disclosure can prompt reciprocal disclosure is Leader #25 who openly concedes that she did not follow the right procedures when she timetabled meetings without checking with the other teacher.

That's probably partly my fault, because when [third person] and I were looking at the timetable and we encountered that problem of just not having anywhere to be able to do the moderation... I didn't realize that emailing staff [with new meeting times] was an inappropriate thing to do. [Leader #25, RHC]

The leader then offers a general invitation to, in the future, immediately inform her of any mistakes of her own. In turn, the other person is apologetic about not having communicated the issue. An open discussion of responsibilities and causes of the concern ensues leading to a shared resolution process.

Leader: *You know, if I do something like that, when I've missed the mark somewhere, I'd really appreciate it if you would come and tell me as soon as I've done it, because I want to know. If I have overstepped the line somewhere, please tell me.*

Other: *Thank you.*

Leader: *I can't do anything about it unless I know and I would have just assumed that it [emailing other staff] was ok. That's my fault as well. I didn't realize that it was inappropriate.*

Other: *I think the mistake rests with me because I should have completed the cycle of communication and I didn't. I made a mistake when I talked with [third person] and just clarified my position, I said that I would talk to you and I haven't done that. So it is my fault. So, it's great to think that that's your position, I really appreciate that.*

Leader: *...with anything, please. If I make a mistake, please just tell me. So then that leaves me with where are we at and what do I do about that moderation?*

Other: *I said to [third person], and I think it still applies, is there a way of still winning both outcomes...?*

Leaders' ratings of the importance of the concern and of their own ability to resolve it, did not seem to have an impact on whether or not leaders disclosed their own contribution. There were no significant differences between the average rating of importance (disclosed, $M = 4.14$ $SD = .9$ and undisclosed $M = 4.25$, $SD = .72$, $t(25) = .319$, $p = .75$) and ability of leaders who did and did not disclose their contribution (disclosed, $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.4$ and undisclosed $M = 2.8$, $SD = .77$, $t(25) = .883$, $p = .39$).

In summary, although about two-thirds of the leaders identified a way in which they might have contributed to the concern, only eight leaders disclosed their possible contribution in the subsequent conversation. In some instances, leaders' disclosure seemed to prompt reciprocal disclosure resulting in more information about the concern being shared aiding the overall concern resolution.

Reasons for Leaders' Non-disclosure

Thematic analyses of transcripts and pre-conversation questionnaire responses of leaders who had not disclosed their contribution suggested three possible reasons for their non-disclosure: leaders' negative attributions about the other person's capabilities and motives, leaders' avoidance of discussing the causes of the concern, and leaders' desire to stay in control of the conversation.

Firstly, leaders seemed influenced by their own negative attributions of the other person's capability or motives. Leaders' judgmental beliefs were often revealed in their unexpressed thoughts. For example, Leader #7, a deputy principal, questioned the other's integrity "*I have significant doubt of his overall integrity in telling and reporting the truth*" and described him as manipulative "*he avoids direct conflict so instead tries to manipulate to get what he wants*" (questionnaire). Negative judgments were also evident in his unexpressed

thoughts “*Ok, he’s either a liar or very naive*”. The leader’s negative attributions were very personal in nature and his thoughts revealed a closed stance towards the other person, possibly preventing him from sharing these thoughts and from disclosing his own contribution to the concern.

A second possible reason for leaders’ non-disclosure seemed to stem from a tendency to jump to the discussion of solution strategies rather than to examine the nature and the causes of the concern (Annan, Lai, & Robinson, 2003). Discussing solutions is seen as more positive and less distressing than talking about what or who has caused a concern, as such discussions can expose one’s own and others’ mistakes or failures. Discussions of mistakes and failures are often avoided to prevent the surfacing of negative emotions, such as threat and embarrassment, which might damage the relationship with the other person. This pattern of ‘jumping to solution talk’ was evident across several conversations and is exemplified by these unexpressed thoughts: “*Ok, good, the issue has been identified. Now reassure and come to some solution. Ask her so there can be some ownership*” [Leader #12, LHC]. The conversation at this point, consisted of two exchanges after the initial greetings: the leader stated her concern, the other person’s acknowledged the existence of the concern after which the conversation immediately turned to the discussion of possible solutions.

Finally, leaders showed a desire to stay in control of the conversation, by steering the discussion away from areas that would jeopardize their own authority, bring up controversial arguments or other related problems. Being in control brings comfort and predictability, while an open discussion brings unpredictability and uncertainty to the conversation. Leaders’ desire to stay in control of the conversation process is evident in leaders’ undisclosed thoughts in multiple conversations.

I can actually see this from your point of view but I don't want to admit it. [Leader #10, LHC]

I'll steer the conversation to what I've seen happening...I'll outline the positives first [Leader #18, LHC]

I've done a lot of listening and nodding, need to put my opinion forward to move things along. [Leader #27, LHC]

In summary, reasons for leaders' non-disclosure of their own contribution lay in their negative attributions about the other person, their tendency to jump to solution talk and their desire to stay in control of the conversation. Concern conversations marked by these behaviors and values will rarely build trusting relationships or progress concern resolution as the parties involved may not share the information needed or commit to a collaborative process. To engage in more trust-building conversations leaders need to embrace a positive attitude to sharing mistakes, weaknesses and vulnerabilities as a way to cultivate openness.

Discussion

The notion of vulnerability is important when thinking about how leaders can build more trusting relationships while resolving concerns that hinder equitable outcomes in schools. The current research examined if leaders exposed their own vulnerability in conversations aimed at resolving their concern with another person. Our findings indicate that most leaders identified their own contribution to the concern, when prompted prior to the conversation in which they sought to resolve it. Two-thirds of leaders indicated they had contributed by either not doing anything, by acting in ways that were inappropriate or insufficient to resolve the concern, or by not clearly communicating their concern in the past. Although unresolved concerns can impede quality teaching and learning, there is considerable evidence for such avoidance in educational contexts (Bridges, 1986; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). For example,

Bryk and Schneider (2002) reported behavior patterns across schools and levels of administration where concerns were ignored, mishandled, or left unresolved. Other research on leader's behavior in conversations has shown how leaders avoid dealing with difficult issues by inaction, moderating their views, or being too lenient with the person involved (Le Fevre, & Robinson, 2014; James & Vince, 2001).

Only one-third of leaders in this study publicly disclosed their contribution in the actual conversations. In some conversations this disclosure prompted reciprocal disclosure of information about the concern and its causes by the other person. These conversations appeared to be shaped by an open-minded stance by the leader and seemed to prompt an open discussion of the concern, its causes and possible solution. These findings are in line with research by Edmondson (2003, 2004), Argyris and Schön (1974) and Zand (1972). Leaders can create an environment of trust in an organization, team or group by reflecting and admitting their own mistakes and weaknesses and in turn encouraging others to communicate mistakes openly. Such conditions prompt learning from mistakes and failures rather than fear of punishment.

One reason for non-disclosure was leaders' negative attributions about the other person. These negative and often judgmental thoughts might signal existing low levels of trust between those involved and might explain the leader's own reluctance to show vulnerability. Low trust environments are often conducive to defensive reasoning, little disclosure and shared problem-solving (Argyris, 1978; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Furthermore, leaders tended to 'jump to solution talk' which offers less possibility to provoke feelings of personal threat, embarrassment or emotional reactions in the other person. On a similar note, leaders seemed to desire staying in control of the conversation, thus avoiding an open discussion of

their mistakes and failures which could have brought unpredictability, uncertainty and emotional reactions to the conversation.

Our research provides rare behavioral data on how leaders' disclosure of their own contribution to a concern fosters trust propensity in others as it signals leaders' truthfulness, benevolence and integrity. By communicating their own vulnerability leaders promote an environment of trust, which can encourage others to discuss mistakes and failures more openly, rather than avoid them out of fear of emotional reactions. This open communication of beliefs and problem-related information can lead to more effective concern resolution and contribute to greater organizational effectiveness, collaboration, and commitment to solving the issues that prevent equitable schooling outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Supporting leaders to engage in these behaviors, however, seems a greater challenge than describing them. What is needed is a shift in thinking about failures and one's own vulnerability. Making mistakes and failures needs to be perceived as a basic human condition that enables learning. It is the recognition that everyone has weaknesses in not knowing, making mistakes, and being fallible in their decision-making that can shift thinking towards a more open-minded stance. If leaders can perceive their own and other's vulnerability as an opportunity for learning, they might be more open to communicate and critically reflect on their own responsibilities and contributions to concerns they are trying to resolve. This could lead to more collaborative concern resolution and more effective conversations. Further research needs to examine how these practices make conversations more effective by including a focus on conversation outcome, an aspect not within scope of this research study.

Our research has implications for those responsible for policy development and those involved in the preparation, induction and professional learning of leaders. Leadership

standards tend to point to a set of values and interpersonal skills required of principals (Centre of Study for Policies and Practices in Education, 2013). These skills and values are often worded broadly with little clear guidance on how they should be enacted. The Australian national standards for educational leaders, for example, point to promoting ‘the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.’ (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p.10), but miss detailing the specific skills and behaviors leaders need to promote these values.

Educational leaders and policy makers also need to create the conditions that foster environments in which mistakes and weaknesses are used as a starting point for collaborative problem-solving and improvement rather than as a focus for punitive measures. Creating such environments at school and district level is an important but not easy task in a culture of growing accountability and in a profession that has a tendency to avoid rigorous problem-solving conversations (Elmore, 2004). Attention also needs to be given to how these skills and values can be learned and developed in principal preparation, induction, and development programs. These programs should introduce leaders to the nature and importance of trust, and provide opportunities to practise the interpersonal skills and values involved, using real and rehearsed on the job conversations. Although such professional learning is time-intensive, it is critical to building the capabilities leaders require to develop teams that are committed to addressing and resolving the challenges of improving learning and teaching.

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