

Quality Feedback: Modeling Reflective Practices in a Performance-Based Leadership Development Program

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Abstract: Quality feedback is essential for development of educational leadership candidates both in the context of providing opportunities engagement in reflective processes that are critical to building their capacity to lead organizational learning and to continue their growth and development as an instructional leader. Performance-based leadership development programs need to integrate a model of quality feedback to ensure that both of these objectives are met. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the performance-based leadership development program at the University of West Georgia models quality feedback practices for candidates through both program and candidate performance assessment systems.

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Introduction

The development of school leaders capable of building, maintaining and supporting learning communities is an essential function in the current environment of high stakes accountability for public schools. Across the country, states are in the midst of transforming requirements for the preparation and certification of school leaders. To meet these changing requirements, universities have had to re-examine their programs and approaches for preparing school leaders. Because principals play such a critical role in improving student achievement through their efforts to "guide teachers to improved practice" performance based programs must include a pervasive focus on instructional leadership (Frey & Fisher, 2009, pp.18).

Professors teaching in newly transformed leadership development programs need to become increasingly more aware of the critical importance of modeling effective leadership and teaching practices in all aspects of their programs.

Professors in programs designed to prepare or develop educational leaders most effectively model best practices related to increasing capacity for learning when they consistently provide candidates with quality feedback. Effective feedback for candidates in leadership preparation and development programs is critical.

A challenge for higher education faculty working to develop school leaders is to not only provide quality feedback for the personal development of each candidate but also to model effective feedback practices

that can be applied to strengthening the capacity of organizational learning in schools.

The model for quality feedback presented in this article is based on the premise that effective leadership development focuses on both organizational and personal learning (Wganer & Kegan, 2006).

Quality Feedback

"Feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies" (Winne & Butler, 1994 p. 5740).

Quality feedback should be specific, descriptive, constructive and reflective. These four critical attributes of quality feedback have been extrapolated from a review of multiple studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Quinton & Smallbone, 2010; Winne & Butler, 1994).

Specific

Feedback should be specifically focused on a goal that has been clearly articulated and reviewed with the learner. Without a definitive, goal-oriented focus, feedback will not have relevance for the learner. Monitoring learning with the intent to provide specific feedback requires a well-sequenced approach to formative assessment that enables the construction of feedback related to a clearly defined learning progression defined by Popham (2008) as

the “sequenced set of subskills and bodies of enabling knowledge” related to the targeted curricular aim (pg.24).

Descriptive

Quality feedback is constructed to explicitly describe the actual output created by the learner in the context of how the effort submitted meets or does not meet the standard expected. A specific description provides the learner with information about their progress toward meeting or exceeding a performance based standard which supports efforts to accomplish the performance task or goal (Hattie & Temperly, 2007).

Constructive

Constructive feedback includes a precise explanation of how the learner can adjust their performance on a task or in their efforts to demonstrate understanding of a concept. Including such an explanation provides learners with information that they can use to adjust their thinking and/or behavior which is far more effective than simply pointing out areas in which the student has not yet met a standard.

Constructive (or corrective) feedback is an essential component of formative assessment, because it provides ideas for specific action the learner can take to improve their performance. In the context of providing feedback on a reflective journal, an instructor committed to including constructive feedback would go beyond a comment such as be more descriptive in your journal. A constructive comment would provide a definite course of action, suggesting perhaps that the learner include

more descriptive statements describing their role in the implementation of a new initiative. The key to constructive feedback is that it provides sufficient information to guide immediate action.

Reflective

In addition to supporting learners' efforts to achieve a performance or learning goal, quality feedback provides a starting point for reflection. Feedback that prompts a learner to reflect on their efforts, promotes metacognition. Metacognition is thinking about our thinking and what we know and the using this knowledge to direct and improve our thinking and learning processes (Halpern, 1998).

Metacognition in concert with the related function of self-regulation involves a search for self-awareness that results in intentional (regulatory) action (Kaplan, 2008). By extending quality feedback to include not only specific, descriptive and constructive comments but also reflective questions, instructors provide a basis for students to engage in continuous learning and development.

Ultimately, the purpose of quality feedback relates to increasing capacity. In the context of Performance-based leadership development, quality feedback should focus on building capacity for both organizational and personal learning, while engaging

candidates in reflective analysis of their own leadership practices.

Building Capacity for Organizational Learning

Organizational learning can be defined as collective learning that results in some level of change that falls along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, collective learning is limited to random refinements and improvements within existing organizational boundaries. At the other end of the continuum, there is synergetic transformation of the mental models that make up the organizational culture. (Hooper, 2004). Synergy is a systems concept often misinterpreted as the whole being more than the sum of its part without the understanding that the whole is often impacted and changed by the interaction of the parts (Willis, 1996).

For organizational learning to move beyond results of superficial refinements and incremental improvements, leaders must nurture a climate that is pervasively focused on creating capacity for learning at all levels. Greater capacity for learning is essential for the system to be able to be flexible and responses to the changing requirements of its environment and its members. Concepts related to organizational learning in educational systems are often addressed in the literature as attributes of learning communities.

Building, maintaining and supporting learning communities requires systematic feedback cycles at all levels of the system. There is evidence in the literature that

quality can prompt reflection and deeper learning (Higgins et al., 2002).

Feedback for creating greater capacity for organizational learning comes from organizational assessments. Effective leaders are equipped to use a variety of approaches for assessing the school as a system in the context of analyzing beliefs, processes, and structures that support or impede rigor in teaching and learning.

Leaders must understand how to use the data from such organizational assessments as feedback for initiating changes that will result in improvement of overall organizational effectiveness.

The performance-based leadership development and certification program at the University of West Georgia provides a model of organizational learning for candidates participating as part of cohorts which are developed as learning communities. As a means to prepare leaders to assess and build capacity for organizational learning in their own schools and districts, candidates are engaged in multiple opportunities to assess the effectiveness of their cohort.

These assessments are based on five characteristics of learning communities identified in the literature: shared values and norms, a clear and consistent focus on student learning, deprivatizing teaching and learning, reflective dialog, and focusing on collaboration (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2006).

Candidates are challenged to craft written feedback in response to their assessment of the cohort in relation to the

characteristics of learning communities. Feedback is expected to address each of the four attributes of quality feedback. As such candidates are expected to provide feedback that is:

- specific (focused on one of the characteristics of a learning community,
- descriptive (include precise explanation of how processes and structures reflect the expected characteristics),
- constructive (provide an actionable suggestion for an adjustment that will strengthen the learning community), and
- reflective (include a prompt for the professor and other candidates to consider as they make adjustments to their individual contributions to the learning community).

The feedback candidates generate is used to make refinements and improvements to the processes and structures of the cohort learning system.

Organizational Learning Feedback Example

Candidates in the performance-based leadership program conduct their initial assessment of the cohort as a learning community at the end of the first six weeks of classes. In one cohort, candidates began the assessment process by evaluating the learning community individually. Each candidate did a thorough analysis of how the cohort functioned in relation to each of the five characteristics of learning communities. Following the individual analysis of all five characteristics, five work teams were formed, each of which were assigned one of the characteristics. For their assigned

characteristic, the team develops written feedback structured to include each of the four attributes of quality feedback. One learning team's feedback related to deprivatizing teaching and learning is included below. The parenthetical notations relate to the attributes of quality feedback (1-specific, 2-descriptive, 3-constructive, 4-reflective).

Our cohort's efforts to deprivatize teaching and learning have been somewhat effective; however some of the approaches seem to be limiting students' engagement with the professor (1). When cohort members shared their protocols for data analysis and others provided written feedback, students felt encouraged to share other artifacts they created. This is an example of how our efforts have been positive. The use of the cohort blog for posting reflections about existing approaches to meeting management in place in schools was not quite as effective. Several students in our group indicated that they were hesitant to share issues with meetings in their departments (and schools) because that was a process managed by their principal and they did not want to be critical in a blog post that might be read by other administrators (2). We might have better results if we focus our efforts to deprivatize practice on field experiences for which WE are responsible and go back to posting reflections on existing school practices (led by others) on the private discussion board that is just between the professor and that one individual student (3). How might having a balance of private and

deprivatized reflections strengthen each individual's growth and development(4)?

Professors reviewing this feedback were able to model reflective analysis of the feedback and make adjustments that strengthened the learning community. In the case of the sample feedback above, criteria was developed to determine which reflections would be shared publically and which would be limited to interactions between individual candidates and the professor.

By modeling the authentic use of feedback from the candidates, the professor prepares them to implement a similar approach to engaging their faculty in the analysis of their school as a learning community. This experience provided leadership candidates the opportunity to engage as both a provider and a facilitator of feedback for building capacity for organizational learning.

While facilitating processes to solicit feedback from faculty for improving organizational learning is a critical competency for educational leaders, it is not sufficient. A second critical component to effective leadership development is engaging in reflective analysis of feedback related to the candidate's personal development.

Building Capacity for Personal Learning

Developing reflective, learning-focused leaders is a shared commitment among faculty working with the performance-based leadership program at the University of West Georgia. The quality

feedback model supports this development and is highly valued by the leadership candidates. Student comments in their evaluation of instruction consistently refer to the model of feedback. One student in particular made the connection between the feedback provided on individual assignments submitted in his portfolio to the type of feedback he expects his teachers to use. "I appreciate the feedback model that you have employed for our work over the last year. It is something I have been pushing my own folks to study and implement, and so having it modeled at the graduate level has been validating."

There is evidence that when students are interested in and value feedback on their own performance, they are prompted to engage in reflecting on their efforts which leads to deeper learning (Higgins et.al., 2002):

As important as this is for developing leaders, the skill of providing teachers with effective feedback as a means of building their capacity to lead learning is just as critical.

The capacity for providing quality feedback seems to be most effectively developed by providing leadership candidates with quality feedback to support their personal learning on their performance that models the type of feedback most appropriate for supporting teachers as they seek to improve their practice. This essentially sets up the leadership candidates to model the type of feedback that they expect teachers to provide for students in their classrooms.

Candidates' leadership performances are assessed using a combination of approaches integrated into a portfolio. Each segment of the portfolio has a clearly defined review process that either includes feedback directly from the professors, or a combination of feedback from their peers in the program, the professor, and a mentor or coach assigned to work with them throughout their degree/certificate program.

Personal Learning Feedback Example

Consider the following example of feedback provided by the professor to an individual candidate. The candidate submitted a portfolio entry that included several video clips from meetings and a reflective narrative related to these experiences. The professor's feedback is included below. The parenthetical notations relate to the attributes of quality feedback (1-specific, 2-descriptive, 3-constructive, 4-reflective).

Your artifacts demonstrate proficiency in the performance standards related to building, supporting, and analyzing learning communities (1). It is evident that with the Science and Social Studies Professional Learning days you have developed and routinely implemented protocols to engage teachers in review of student work products and performances to adjust instruction. I was not sure how you used the feedback from the faculty to make adjustments to strengthen the learning community (2). Consider developing a "do-now, do later" later list that addresses the concerns raised I in the teachers' discussion (3). How might your

modeling of making adjustments in response to their feedback impact their use of student feedback to make adjustments in their classrooms (4). You need to add an action plan to portfolio to complete the r requirements of this field experience (3).

At the beginning of the program, students were startled by the quantity of feedback given and appreciative of the opportunity to use the feedback to improve their portfolio entries. The quality of the reflections submitted increased dramatically as candidates progressed through the program.

Reflection incorporates critical thinking related to experiences and develops a leader's capacity for making reasoned judgments about their day to day leadership practices.

In addition to the consistent use of quality feedback provided by the professor on each student's portfolio submissions, each seminar and class meeting is designed to include specific opportunities to engage in reflective dialog, provide reflective feedback on a structure or process or to review written feedback provided by the professor.

The consistent and pervasive use of quality feedback in this performance based program provides opportunities for leaders to engage in reflective processes that are critical to building their capacity to lead organizational learning and to continue their growth and development as an instructional leader.