

FEELINGS OF LONLINESS AND ISOLATION THAT OCCUR FOR BEGINNING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: SHOULD PROFESSORS ADDRESS THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

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Abstract

This was a study was conducted with ten individuals were interviewed to determine whether they had experienced feelings of isolation and disengagement from those who had been peers in the work-place. Each respondent was interviewed to determine the extent, if any, that “executive loneliness” occurred in their initial year of educational leadership. Only one individual experienced limited feelings of isolation while nine individuals experienced significant disengagement in surprisingly different forms. The stories of four individuals who participated in the study are told.

Key Words

Leadership, isolation, executive-loneliness

Introduction

Charlotte had been career-long Business Education instructor and a one-year curriculum coach when the call came that would forever change her life in the business of education. The high school principal in her attendance center had abruptly decided to retire and she was being called upon to become his replacement. It was early summer and her summer vacation was now going to be over in one week as opposed to the eight weeks she had expected. She had prepared for this day. Having just concluded a masters degree in educational leadership, she was licensed to become a building-level administrator and was eager, yet nervous about her new assignment.

As Charlotte eased into her new position, her technical skills appeared to be in tact. She was organized, she knew the school’s curriculum, she understood the teaching process and how to evaluate it, and she knew the nature of her students by age and by culture. What she didn’t realize was how her relationships with those with whom she had worked in the past few years would drastically change.

I wasn’t ‘part of the group’ any more. Teachers and former supervisors (administrators) watched my every move. Those who had been my peers treated me differently, but they in turn expected special favors such as additional field trips, additional instructional money, preferential times for conference periods, overlooking that they were not on duty, or that they were late for school.

Assistant principals (who were passed over by her promotion) within my building tested my authority. They would come in late to see if I would say anything. One continued to chew tobacco. Others did not

enforce all the school policies turning over difficult discipline situations to me to see if I would or could handle them. Basically they set me up to fail through their insubordinate acts.

Welcome to the world of executive loneliness in the work-place. Although no formal definition is in place for this dilemma, for the purposes of this study it could generally be described as the isolation and loneliness one encounters when transitioning from the teaching ranks to leadership positions within the school environment.

Without exception, those interviewed for this study encountered some degree of executive loneliness. The isolation and separation encountered in transition from the classroom to positions of educational leadership impacted the personal lives of the study's participants and in some instances the lives of their families. Most indicated that they were not prepared for the stark contrast in relationships that they had encountered upon leaving the teaching ranks and becoming educational leaders.

This study is focused on individuals who, within their school districts, transitioned from teaching or coordinator positions to positions in educational leadership. It is focused on individuals who became educational leaders in buildings where they had held teaching positions or in district level positions to which they had transitioned from teaching or coordinator positions.

In an extensive study by Sias, et. al [1], it was observed that job promotion from within an organization can be a significant factor in workplace relationships. In an interview with an individual who was impacted by this type of situation the following observation was made. "He became my supervisor and I think that relationship, the fact that he was promoted, he didn't feel like he probably could be as close, because other people would think that there was favoritism involved or something (p.12)." In another narrative in the same study it was revealed that promotion from within the workplace had a significant impact on friendships:

I think that's just a natural progression. The camaraderie is different . . . You can't be a friend. I guess you could still be a friend, but not the same level of friend once you take on a leadership position . . .

You go from an equal to non-equal person . . . It affected me the same way when I was promoted. I couldn't have the same relationship with some of the people in the shop that I used to (p.12).

Executive loneliness may also be a result of resentment from individuals who have been passed over for a position or who have had a friend passed over. When this is the case, Glen [2] observed that it can create significant conflict in the workplace.

When someone is passed over for a promotion or a desired assignment, he can react unpredictably. He may try to undermine the person who did get the job, lashing out or perhaps trying to foment a coup. He may simply try to provoke others to confirm his value and worth (p.34).

Promotion from within sometimes makes the promoted individuals feel as if they must distance themselves to the point that they are feared by subordinates. They were once a coworker and then fond themselves in positions of authority over their former peers with the feeling of a need to be separated in a dramatic fashion. According to Natasha Nicholson [3], executive editor of *Communications World*, many managers new to a position mistakenly take the 'fear factor' too far. "A business leader once told me, 'I never want to get too close to my employees. If they fear me, I know I have their respect,' I can still hear the alarm that went off in my head, I couldn't disagree more. Not only does fear not build respect, it creates an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust (p. 2)." This self induced culprit of executive loneliness appears to create an atmosphere of confrontation and polarization.

What this business leader and others who share his opinion don't realize is that real respect requires trust, and that fear and trust are near polar opposites. For employees to be engaged and motivated, they need to feel that their work is worthwhile, that they are contributing to something important. Respect for a leader is directly related to that person's ability to offer employees what they need to perform well, follow through on commitments, communicate honestly, reward justly, and compensate fairly (p.2).

Kramer and Nolan [4] observed that the feeling of isolation may not be as significant for an individual who has transferred into a new workplace as opposed to one who has been promoted from within an organization. In many instances, those new to management after being promoted from within felt a sense of isolation not only from former peers with whom they worked, but also from the management team that once supervised them. They indicated that their former peers treated them like the “office snot” (p. 346) while former supervisors treated them “like a pledge” (p. 346) because they had been promoted from within from a non-management position.

The notion of the new manager feeling isolation from both former peers (current subordinates) and superiors is supported in a study conducted by Lindorff [5] where it was observed that managers are most often strongly supported by individuals functioning at the same organizational level. It is also suggested that the affective dimension of support in the workplace is nonexistent. “...most types of support, including care, consolation, and acceptance, are available from relationships outside the workplace, most frequently from a spouse or partner. This suggests a qualitative difference between work and non-work relationships (p. 280).”

In a discussion of moving into a management position where an individual is supervising former colleagues, Wallington [6] characterizes the new workplace relationships falling into four different categories. “When you become the boss, your former peers will fall into one of four categories: leavers, testers, passive resisters and boosters. Leavers are those who, for a variety of reasons, won't stick around. Testers are uncertain about your leadership. They will find ways to challenge your style of management and your expectations of your staff. Passive resisters will test your patience as they disagree with every idea. Even when they express agreement, they will often follow their own agenda anyway. Boosters are those who are happy to be working with you, and they'll tout your leadership to others. Boosters can be anywhere in the company, from the CEO to an entry-level employee (p.13)

Although little is written regarding feelings of isolation that may occur as one leaves the classroom and enters the arena of educational leadership, ethical compromises may emerge when school administrators maintain associations that may result in or be perceived as favoritism. Rebores [7] emphasizes that educational leaders should engage in the “virtue of justice” (p. 344) when working with personnel in the school environment. “Honesty is violated when administrators use their position in a professional association for personal gain. When an employee receives preferential treatment simply because of a friendship with a certain administrator, the virtue of justice is violated” (p.344).

Educational leaders often feel as if they give up their sense of belonging at the building level when they move from the classroom to leadership positions. They must use caution to not become so attuned to the division of roles that they lose their ethic of caring to the staff they are leading. This is recognized by Ubben, Hughes, and Norris [8] in a discussion of a need for social interaction.

The need for social interaction becomes prevalent at this stage of consciousness. The individual reaches beyond his or her need for self-preservation to appreciate the needs of others. There is an increasing need to belong at this stage – not only within family and social groups but also to organizations. Organizational affiliation is viewed as adherence to rules, policies, and procedures; therefore, an administrator at this phase strives to “operate by the book,” yet at the same time project a caring, considerate attitude toward subordinates. Since schools are viewed as “families,” there is emphasis on collegiality and a desire to foster a sense of belonging to the staff (p.13).

The Parameters of the Study

This study was conducted to determine what, if any, feelings of executive loneliness were encountered by those entering the field of educational leadership. The rationale for conducting the study was to develop

some level of awareness and preparation for candidates in educational leadership programs should it be indicated that executive loneliness is a reality in a practitioner's world.

A Participant Oriented Design (Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick, [9] was utilized to collect the qualitative data for this study from ten individuals who had entered the principalship within the previous two years. In this approach, the human element is emphasized and "directs the... attention to the needs for those for whom an evaluation is being done (p. 147)." The primary purpose of this approach was utilized so professors and candidates in educational leadership programs "could develop new insights...in regard to educational, social, and corporate programs (p.147)."

The study was guided by the following questions which were presented to a group of first and second-year educational leaders:

1. How long have you been in your current (leadership) position?
2. What was your previous position within this school?
3. Were you also a student in this same school?
4. Have you experienced feelings of loneliness or isolation in your supervisory position? Please describe.
5. Did you sense a change in the attitudes of your former peers or former supervisors when you were promoted to an administrative or supervisory position? If possible, please describe specific instances.
6. Did you anticipate a change in relationships, feelings of loneliness, or isolation in your supervisory position with your former peers?
7. To what do you attribute this change in relationships and/or the feelings?
8. What have you done to live with the feelings of loneliness and/or isolation or the changes in relationships?
9. What advice do you have to aspiring school leaders confronted with a similar situation?

The Responses

Charlotte: Teacher to High School Principal; Promoted from Within

Charlotte was a second-year principal who had served in her school district's high school as a business education instructor for eighteen years and as a curriculum coach for one year. She was now serving as the principal of the building in which she had taught.

I definitely encountered feelings of isolation and loneliness in my new position. Having to make difficult decisions, particularly with scheduling, seemed to isolate me the most. I saw significant attitude changes among the staff. I was no longer 'part of the group.' Teachers and former supervisors (administrators) watched my every move. Peers treated me differently, but they, in-turn, expected special favors. Supervisors who were assistant principals when I was a teacher tried to set me up for failure. I felt a great deal of resentment from them, because they had been 'passed-over' for the principalship. What they didn't know was that I was approached by central office administration for the position. I did not formally apply for it.

I did not anticipate the change of relationships to the extent those changes occurred, but attribute the changes to being promoted from within. Also, I attribute this to the fact that I was no longer their peer. I was now observing them and was perceived as the 'boss' and the person of authority. One specific example of a change came from a teacher who had been a department head when I was a curriculum coach. She was late for deadlines, could not keep track of her budget, and was very disorganized. She applied for a curriculum coach's position and did not get it because of the way she functioned as the

department head. It certainly changed our personal relationship, but I felt that is was the correct decision based on what I had observed.

There didn't appear to be a lot of ways to deal with the feelings of loneliness and isolation that I encountered. I quickly realized that those emotions came with the job...especially as a result from being promoted from within. I learned to develop relationships with my new set of peers. If I needed to discuss a problem or situation, I called another principal for advice. They became a new set of friends. I learned that even though they were at different grade levels, their problems were similar to mine. My advice to anyone entering the principalship (especially after being promoted from within) is to realize up front that you are not going to have the same relationships with those who were your peers when you were on the teaching staff. You are no longer their peers and while you may not see things changing in those relationships, they do.

Dale: Teacher to Middle School Principal; Promoted from Within

Dale was a third-year principal who had taught social studies in the building in which he was appointed as the principal. Prior to his current appointment, he had functioned as the building's assistant principal for four years.

I was a social studies teacher in the building where I became an assistant principal and principal. Not only had I taught in the building, but I was a student in the building and was now supervising some of the teachers who had taught me as a middle school student.

I cannot say that I experienced any isolation or loneliness in my new positions of leadership. My teaching relationships with staff members were mostly professional and not social. That is not to say that we were unfriendly to one another. I felt as if we got along well, but our relationships were only casual conversations and nothing beyond that. Although there were teachers on the staff who had been my teachers and fellow staff members who had been fellow students, none of them had interests that I had. Most of my social life involved my family (especially my children), and none of the staff members had children the same age as mine. None of them went to my church or belonged to any of the community organizations to which I belonged.

I did not anticipate a change in relationships with former peers when I was appointed to my new position. As a former military officer, I experienced promotions from within quite frequently. I was promoted and I had friends who were promoted. There was a protocol that was followed when this occurred and I pretty much functioned with the same perceptions in the field of education. I had a job description and focused on doing that job. I still had casual conversations with my former peers just as I had when we taught together, but my relationships with them really were not impacted. I was their principal and they were my teachers. We worked together very well and the transition for me was a good one. One thing that may have made a difference was that I did not start teaching as a twenty-three year old. I went to the military after high school and then worked briefly in the private sector prior to going to college and getting my degree. I'm sure that I was not perceived as a "kid" when I began teaching in the building where I became the principal.

Beth: Teacher to Elementary Principal, Promoted from Within

Beth had taught six years as an elementary school mathematics instructor in grades five and six prior to being appointed as her district's elementary school assistant principal. She had worked for 23 years in another field unrelated to education. She attended school in grades kindergarten through twelve in the building in which she was employed.

I certainly had the feelings of loneliness as I entered into the principalship. Not only did I experience it from those with whom I had previously taught, but also from the principal who was my direct

supervisor. My former peers would be talking and see me coming down the hall or entering the room and the conversation would soon stop. When they discussed things with me or wanted a problem addressed the term 'this is why you make the big bucks' was often used. It was if they loved me when they needed me and had little use for me otherwise. It was a very difficult transition. To make it more difficult, if I gave an answer that teachers didn't like, they would go to the principal.

In many of the cases involving student discipline, the principal would overrule my decisions. I did not complain to the district superintendent, but had some frank conversations with the principal. I decided by mid-year that I would not return to this position under these circumstances. I knew that a principal's position was opening up in another of our attendance centers and that I would apply for one. Had I not gotten it I had made my mind up to return to the classroom as a mathematics instructor.

I really did not anticipate the level of change in relationships that I would encounter by the change in positions. I had known most of the teachers and administrative personnel in my district my entire life. It is a rural school district and most of the people don't move away after high school. I must say that the attitudes of the people whom I had known ever since I could remember really surprised and disappointed me. This certainly was not everybody with whom I worked, but there were quite a few. Teachers expected special favors as far as schedules and duties. There were some who would chronically come to work late. When I had discussions with them, they didn't like it. I really felt as if they tried to take advantage of our friendship. When I stood firm, their attitudes toward me changed.

To cope with this change, I became friends with a fellow principal. I could talk to him on a professional level and he gave me some really good advice. He became my mentor. One thing he told me was to keep a very good set of notes regarding conferences that I had with teachers. Being part of a small town, many teachers and school personnel had family members on the board of education, as did I. My mentor told me that they would not hesitate to go around me to board members when they did not get their way. It happened to me and I was prepared for it. Also, I learned to develop relationships away from school. It is a little more difficult in a rural environment, but I did it. Mostly, I kept my relationships and conversations in school and about school business on a professional level. Some of those with whom I had confrontations wanted to take it to a personal level and I just wouldn't go there...another great tip from my mentor.

I would advise any person going into a leadership role in a school to be prepared for relationship changes. I think this is especially true if one is promoted from within an organization as I was. People know you, they know your family, friends, social habits, and often go to church with you. You must realize that you are going to have to separate yourself in some fashion. No longer can you go talk to the teacher next door or the teacher who was your best friend in the building. Those relationships take on a significant change.

Keith: Teacher Turned Assistant Superintendent: Promoted from Within

Keith had been a mathematics teacher in the junior high school of the district where he became the assistant superintendent. He had worked in a retail business fifteen years and had decided to go to college to become a teacher. After serving nine years as a teacher he became the district's technology director and director of transportation and maintenance for two years. When a position became available for an assistant superintendent he applied and was employed to oversee the district's curriculum.

I can't say that my new position ever caused me to encounter feelings of isolation or loneliness. I immediately established working relationships with the other two assistant superintendents and the superintendent. I was not in a position to feel impacted by the separation that occurs when one leaves the classroom. Unfortunately, my wife, a reading specialist in the district bore the brunt of those feelings.

If I could pinpoint any specific instance that caused this it would have been when a major personnel issue arose. It involved a teacher being terminated and the teacher was under my supervision. The teacher simply was not doing the tasks that were described in the job description, and I felt as if our students were being harmed as a result. I recommended the teacher's termination and the board of education accepted that recommendation. From that point, my wife was 'iced' by many in her building. She did not know what was going on with the situation, because it was not discussed at home. Many of those she considered to be her best friends stopped speaking to her...they would look away when passing her in the hallway. It was unbelievably hurtful to her. Having come from the retail world, I was prepared for most anything in encountering with people, but it caught her totally off guard. I really didn't consider or worry about the change in relationships that I would encounter as I moved into an administrative position. I knew that my former teaching peers would not be in my presence other than at meetings or professional venues. What I didn't expect was the impact it would have on my wife's relationships with her peers. When I interviewed for my position, my wife being a teacher and me being an administrator within the same district was discussed. One other assistant superintendent had a similar situation. It was agreed that I would remove myself from any personnel discussions or decisions involving her, and I was comfortable with that. It just hurt to see what she was encountering and that it was based upon something totally beyond her control. It was something she had no knowledge of and really hurt her. We got past it and new friends were made outside of the school setting. Though tensions have eased, we both learned a valuable lesson and that is when a spouse becomes an administrator, both spouses had better be prepared for school-time relationships to change. I would advise anybody going into a leadership position in a school district where their spouse is employed to be prepared to have both lives impacted. We made a decision up front that school stays at school and that we would not talk about confidential school issues. We have both abided by that and it has worked. I would also advise prospective school leaders to look for social relationships beyond those within the school family, because it has been my experience that they change significantly.

Executive Loneliness: Points of Discussion and Recommendations

Of the five male and four female educational leaders interviewed, eight had encountered significant instances of executive loneliness. Seven encountered them directly while one participant's spouse was impacted. The one participant who didn't encounter those feelings was a career military professional who had encountered many promotions from within his military organization and indicated that his experiences in that venue probably kept him from experiencing executive loneliness.

Those who experienced the greatest degrees of executive loneliness all indicated significant changes in personal relationships with former teaching peers. They felt as if they had to be on constant guard so former peers would not take advantage of friendships that would lead to special favors. Attitudes of former teaching peers toward them changed significantly. As one participant put it, "I was no longer part of the crowd."

As professors in educational leadership discuss the affective dimension of the profession with degree candidates, the topic of executive loneliness should always be addressed. Of the nine educational leaders interviewed for this study, eight encountered some degree of executive loneliness. Each of the interviewees had been promoted from within their districts and was supervising former teaching peers.

Although no literature was found related specifically executive loneliness in the educational setting, a great deal was found relating to the corporate world. Without exception, individuals promoted from within organizations encountered significant changes in relationships. These changes not only were encountered among former position peers, but were also among current peers who were former supervisors.

Similar changes were encountered by those interviewed for this study. The transition from teacher to educational leader was often a 'test' for the first two years. Although none of those interviewed for the study left educational leadership due to executive loneliness, some strongly considered leaving and going back into the classroom.

As a result of this limited study, it is recommended that educational leadership programs prepare candidates for the change in personal relationships that are likely to occur when one transitions from teacher to supervisor. This is especially important when that transition comes from within an organization.

Questions for Further Study

1. Is Executive Loneliness pervasive in the first year of educational leadership and should its presence be addressed in course work?
2. Should educational leaders avoid hiring from within?
3. Should educational leaders employ principals from within the teaching ranks of current buildings?
4. Do new peers in the principalship contribute to executive loneliness?
5. If executive loneliness exists, how do we help our students encounter it?

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