

Educational leadership in the context of my school

[Business](#), [Management](#)



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The notion of leadership is universal and its meaning has evolved since ancient times. Bass (2008) highlights that during our hunter-gatherer ancestors' period, people were in need of a physically strong leader, who would defend and protect his people from outside dangers. With the rise of civilization, leader's role evolved into being an intelligent decision maker to resolve problems within the nation. Even in Kazakhstani history, people recognized old, wise, and experienced individuals as leaders and decision-makers, and called them ' bi'; while physically strong and brave warriors were called ' batyr', and were referred to as heroes rather than leaders, thus showing the shift in society's mind for the meaning of leadership. The change in the role of a leader has equally affected educational leadership. The research on educational leadership suggests that school principals nowadays mostly rely on vice-principals, thus making it clear that leadership of a group is prevalent in schools. However, regardless of worldwide trends, leadership styles of the principals are strongly dependent on the school context. Therefore, in this essay I will attempt to define what educational leadership is to me, and determine my preferred style of leadership in my school context.

Educational Leadership

One of the great examples of historical Kazakhstani educational leaders is Ybyrai Altynsarin, who established the first mainstream primary school in Kazakhstani steppe in 1864 during the rule of the Royal Russia. Altynsarin's initiative comprised of many responsibilities as a leader, since he not only had to take part in building the school, make the curriculum content, train the teachers, and at the same time come to terms with the bureaucratic officials, but also had to change Kazakh people's minds that they need education, and that their children have to go to school.

Altynsarin was an exceptional 'heroic' leader. As Kazakhstan's education system developed after Altynsarin's heroism, the school leadership is likewise undergoing fundamental changes. Individual 'heroic' leadership of the school principal is now considered to be an outdated approach to leadership. Harris (2012) alerts us that we should not only focus on principal's leadership in school, but also consider other parties, who also take part in leading. Thus, it becomes difficult to define who is the school leader, leader's role, and what educational leadership is, due to the complexity of its nature and difficulties in grasping all of its aspects.

Nonetheless, as Bush and Glover (2014) suggest, we can define leadership in three dimensions: leader's values, leadership as an influence, and leader's vision. Such outlook will provide us with an opportunity to examine main aspects of educational leadership in more detail. An educational leader should base decisions on core values that are both important to him/her and to the community in general. Individual's values are defined locally from the longstanding traditions, culture, history and even recent globalization trends.

Values are the foundation of leader's personality, influence and vision in serving the community.

In school leadership, a leader exerts both direct and indirect influence on teaching and learning processes. Apart from school principal's direct influence on teachers through his/her position, the principal's indirect influence through equitable treatment and rewards for good performance affect staff's morale. Hence, with the power to motivate and inspire teachers and students, the principal's leadership is crucial in school's overall atmosphere and students' learning outcomes. Leader's direction-setting role is exercised through having a vision for the development and improvement of the school. As Bass (2008) puts it, "leaders define reality for followers". They define the past, the present and the future of the organization. Thus, school leaders' vision sets the direction and leads teachers and students for success in teaching and learning.

Nowadays, researchers agree that there is no single general definition of leadership. The extensive literature available on leadership and leadership styles make it possible to dive deeper into theory of each style and learn about the best practices. Notably, studies suggest that leadership is characterized differently among professions. For example, the person who is a leader in sports might not have a lot of common features with a leader in business. Then it is safe to assume that leadership should be studied within its context rather than attempting to generalize it. While, theoretical knowledge of leadership and its styles is an excellent way to start the search for the most appropriate style in the given context, Glatter and Kydd (2003)

advise not to seek off-the-shelf solutions, and not to apply theory into practice blindly. In that sense, I will consider educational leadership styles strictly in the context of my school.

Leadership Styles

If we think about what made Altynsarin such an inspirational leader, who made history, we can conclude that his actions were heroic. Heroic leadership was the right style for the 19th century Kazakh people, as Bass (2008) notes close leadership is required for “ inexperienced novices” than for “ experienced experts”. Now the question is, are we still inexperienced, needing authoritative leadership, or are we moving towards becoming experts, who can even become leaders themselves?

Kazakhstan’s history of being a colonial country under Russia has shifted people’s mind into being submissive, not opposing and not criticizing the leader. Evidently, positional leader are considered to be authoritative figures and are followed almost blindly. This was the case in my school four years ago. Teachers’ fear of power has resulted in school principal resorting to authoritarian leadership style, while teachers were too afraid of possible disciplinary action to make complaints and obeyed her orders. The principal had excellent managerial and administrative skills, but the true danger of such leadership was the lack of innovative thinking to meet global demands in education, as only one person was responsible for the improvement of the school. In one academic year, this principal was replaced. I drew an apparent conclusion that individual authoritative leadership is not enough in modern times, even if the principal is a good manager and administrator.

The next appointed principal of my school was the most inspiring leader in my life, and I believe that his leadership style is what I would prefer to adopt in the future. First of all, his charismatic personality, rational thinking and excellent communicative skills won him teachers' sympathy from the first day of his work. His speeches during staff meetings were natural, personal and inspiring at the same time. He shared his worries, his thoughts on making the school a great place to study and work, and shared his vision of the school with teachers, thus making us part of the change that he initiated. Teachers were moved by his sincerity and got instantly motivated to help the principal in his endeavor.

Secondly, despite being a newly appointed principal, he did not fear to ease restrictions on teachers imposed by the top executives, such as being at school grounds at all times including lunch breaks, and coming to school even if the teacher does not have any classes. He had to go through many conflicts with the executives to protect teachers' interests, and the teachers saw his resolve and intention to provide a comfortable workplace for them. The atmosphere in the school has improved immensely. Teachers felt cared after, and significant to the school, in contrary to their previous experience.

Finally, the appointments of teacher-leaders and the principal's openness to ideas of other staff have driven my school in the right direction. Mandatory to teacher-leaders and optional to anyone in the school, he asked the expression of concerns, share of ideas and suggestion of solutions for some of the school's problems. During those times I felt responsible and accountable to the school's wellbeing and started actively participating in

school affairs, even though I was merely a Mathematics teacher without any legitimate power. I think my school principal succeeded in making teachers feel valuable and leader-like, and had a great impact not only on the school, but on our personalities too. This example of the principal in my school convinced me that Kazakhstani people are making progress in moving away from their submissive behavior and are ready to welcome new innovative leadership approaches.

Comparing my preferred leadership style to the popular ones mentioned in various literatures, I believe that it is the mixture of transformational and distributed leadership styles. Summarizing Bush and Glover's (2014) definitions, transformational leaders are the ones, who focus on raising teachers' commitment and motivation transforming them into leaders, while distributed leadership style implies sharing the leadership through interdependence between the members of the organization. My school principal's leadership that I admire the most, focused on letting teachers be part of school leadership, and feel responsible for the school matters through cooperative work with each other and the principal to make strategic decisions and improve the school. Undoubtedly, my preferred leadership style has some drawbacks. For instance, the success of my school principal's leadership was partly due to his rational thinking abilities, charisma and personality. It is difficult to predict whether another principal would have succeeded the same way he did using the same approach due to their different personalities.

Another issue is the lack of managerial and administrative skills when providing teachers freedom to work comfortably. There were a few teachers, who abused the principal's trust, and quite occasionally did not come to work without a good reason to do so. Their behavior shows that there are times when the leader must be firm in using disciplinary action. Additionally, the principal's openness to others made him spend a lot of time in sometimes-unnecessary discussions, rather than doing his own work and meeting his deadlines.

Lastly, I think I was lucky enough to work with a team of teachers who were supportive and were the ones who also strived for changes, and thus welcomed such a democratic leader. However, if most of the teachers were to leave the school, it is once again unpredictable whether the principal's leadership style would fit the group of new teachers.

Conclusion

History of humankind is the evidence of the evolution of the notion of leadership shifting from 'heroic' leadership to shared group leadership. Educational leadership, in particular, is no exception to this tendency. However, the definition of leadership in itself is not concrete, and is a subject to different interpretations within different spheres. I considered the concept of educational leadership through the prism of values, influence and vision, and identified the leadership style that I prefer the most for my school context. In Kazakhstani history, the 'heroic' leadership of Ybyrai Altynsarin 1860s is the example of appropriate leadership style fitting into the context of Kazakhstani society in that era. However, Kazakhstani people are no

longer uneducated needing a 'heroic' leader, and rather majority of them are in a position to be able take part in decision-making. I found the evidence for such a claim from my experience of working in my school for four years. The difference in school climate from two school principals, one of them being an authoritative managerial leader and the other being transformational leader applying distributed leadership in school management was striking. While the latter one failed to be innovative and meet the demand of the community, the other had an enormous success, judging from the achievements of the teachers and students. Therefore the leadership styles that I prefer for my school are transformational and distributed.

There is no doubt that these two styles are not the remedy for the maintenance and development of the school, and there are certain challenges in applying them, such as the lack of management and administration. Nevertheless, I believe that my school is an example of Kazakhstani school, where the modern western theoretical approaches to educational leadership are being applied successfully.