

A Picture of Leadership in Four Frames

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Through experience, self-reflection, and reading and research, I feel more confident as a leader now than I did ten years ago. I feel similarly about parenting; I am more confident as a father now than I was when I first became a parent 11 years ago because of everything I have learned in this role since my son was born. Yet now that he is about to enter adolescence, I am becoming more cognizant of how he views me not only as a parent but also as a role model. Adolescents often look to adults in order to determine appropriate and acceptable behavior, as well as to identify models of who they want to be like (Hurd, Zimmerman, and Xue, 2009). Comparatively, I feel that leaders can serve as role models at their organizations by exemplifying the behaviors that they wish to observe in others. In 1984, Bolman and Deal consolidated major schools of organizational thought into a comprehensive framework encompassing four perspectives, each of which is used by both academics and practitioners (Bolman & Deal, 2017). By analyzing my own leadership style with Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resource, political, symbolic, and structural frames of organizational behavior, I will discover which frames I am currently utilizing effectively as well as which frames I need to improve upon in order to become a leader that is adept at all four.

The Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 113). After completing Bolman and Deal's Leadership Orientations Self-Assessment (LOSA; 2017), I was not surprised to find that I rated myself highest on the human resource frame because my top priority as a leader is to develop strong interpersonal relationships with my colleagues and my team. My overarching leadership philosophy mirrors what Conan O' Brien told his audience during his last episode as host of *The*

Tonight Show in 2010: “If you work really hard and you’re kind, amazing things will happen” (Mattamable, 2010). I feel that the full potential of an organization cannot be reached unless leaders are not only active members of their teams but also prioritize treating their employees with kindness and respect.

One example of my proclivity towards the human resource frame is how I approach serving on search committees at the University of Mary Washington (UMW). I often find that one or more members of a search committee can become unwilling to consider a candidate who asks about the opportunity for advancement within the organization. With the amount of time, energy, and resources that are spent during the hiring process, it is understandable why there is a preference for new hires to remain in the position that they are seeking for an extended period of time. Nonetheless, I appreciate a candidate that asks about advancement because it indicates a motivation to learn, develop, and grow as an employee, something that can only help the overall mission of the organization. When asked this question during an interview, I always try to take the opportunity to explain to the potential candidate that the opportunity for advancement often depends on whether or not he or she will be able to develop strong skills in their position, focus on learning as much as possible about the organization, and form positive relationships with other individuals. My explanation not only focuses on what an employee can do for an organization, but what opportunities the organization may be able to offer for the employee.

I also routinely encourage new employees to become engaged at our institution by attending or joining committees on campus in order to network with other individuals and learn about other departments. Moreover, I encourage staff to take advantage of free or low-cost health and fitness services that UMW offers to its employees. Studies have found that after exercising, employees were more tolerant of their colleagues and demonstrated a noticeable

improvement in their work performance (Anonymous, 2014). There is a symbiotic relationship between most employees and organizations; I believe that an employee that feels supported to nurture their own professional development and well-being will naturally develop the trust needed to develop a stronger commitment to the organization.

The Political Frame

In terms of my percentile ranking on the LOSA (Bolman & Deal, 2017) compared to other leaders, my second highest rating was on the political frame. Bolman and Deal (2017) described the political frame as considering organizations turbulent arenas that host ongoing contests of individual and group interests. I understand why I would rate this frame as second highest because it serves as a natural extension of the human resource frame's emphasis on the codependent relationship that exists between organizations and its employees. A political leader's responsibility is to help develop and nurture this relationship.

In likening an organization to a coalition, Bolman and Deal (2017) explained how a coalition forms because its members need each other, even though their interest may only partly overlap (p. 185). By this definition, nearly every major organization can be described as a coalition. My responsibility, from the perspective of a political leader, is to assist with managing how different individuals and departments can work effectively with one another even though their interests at the organization may be different.

In addition to my role as the Senior Associate Registrar of UMW, I also serve as the Stafford Campus Coordinator. In this capacity, my main responsibility is to serve as a point of contact for individuals that have questions and concerns about the campus. However, upon assuming this role I thought it would be helpful to hold monthly meetings where representatives from each department on campus can meet to discuss various issues. Since most of our

university activity takes place at the Fredericksburg Campus, staff and faculty at the smaller Stafford Campus can often experience low morale due to feelings of isolation from the main campus. I created these meetings to bring staff and faculty at the Stafford Campus together in order to create engagement and boost morale. Graham Cole (2015) explained that engagement becomes contagious among those working closely together and the optimism and proactive nature of engaged team members helps nurture a positive atmosphere throughout the team. Influence is particularly strong when group leaders are engaged (p. 26). Looking through the lens of the political frame, I can see how these meetings serve as a useful way to create a strong coalition at the Stafford Campus which hopefully creates a greater sense of connection with the university as a whole.

The Symbolic Frame

Organizational symbols can consist of myths, visions, and values, heroes and heroines, fairy tales and stories, rituals and ceremonies, and metaphor, humor, and play (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 242). I was not surprised that my percentile ranking on the LOSA (2017) for the symbolic leader frame was lower than my scores for the human resource and political frames. Due to my tendency to work primarily within the human resource and political frames, I am confident that my reputation is one of a hardworking, team-oriented leader who cares about getting along with others and helping bring people together towards common goals. I do not, however, consider myself an overly charismatic leader or a unique visionary, two examples that the LOSA (2017) believes exemplifies a symbolic leader.

Whereas the human resource and political frames focuses on putting others first, the symbolic frame casts the leader as the primary focus. In my experience, leaders that are known as charismatic visionaries and skilled storytellers possess a high level of self-confidence in their

areas of expertise. Over the last few years, I have arrived at the conclusion that hard work, determination, and a commitment to others are only part of what makes an impactful leader; one area that I need improvement in is my confidence level in my leadership and management ability. I began the Ed.D. program in Leadership at VCU because I wanted to formally study different leadership and management theories in order to increase my knowledge base in these areas. While I work on this goal, I must remember to utilize those symbols that I currently possess in order to inspire and energize others.

From a very young age, I have always used humor to connect with others. Humor releases tension and helps resolve issues arising from day-to-day routines as well as from sudden emergencies (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 272). Whenever possible, I try to integrate my good-natured sense of humor to professional interactions, especially ones that may involve potential stress and tension. While I aspire to become a more knowledgeable leader, I have to remember that my sense of humor can be used as a tool to motivate and bring others together.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) explained how as leaders navigate how to motivate individuals to do things, sometimes how a message is delivered is more important than the actual message. Within the symbolic frame of leadership, Bolman and Deal (2017) provided many different examples of how to effectively deliver a message. Even though I am still in the infancy stages of the Ed.D. program, I believe I am building my confidence as a leader and beginning to understand more about how leaders can find different ways to motivate and inspire others.

The Structural Frame

My LOSA (2017) results indicated that my score on the structural frame rated in a very low percentile range compared to other leaders. Bolman & Deal (2017) indicated that leaders rate themselves considerably higher on the human resources and structural frames than they do

the political and symbolic frames. I believe I did not rate myself high on the structural frame because I have not had much experience with the two central issues of structural design: allocating work (differentiation) and coordinating diverse efforts after parceling out responsibilities (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 53). While I believe I operate as a leader through the structural perspective by thinking logically and rationally when dealing with issues, thus far in my career I have not had enough experience in designing different team structures to feel exceptionally confident working within this frame.

Prior to my current position at UMW, I never maintained a supervisory role where I had direct reports. Aside from occasionally managing a student aide or performing in a limited supervisory capacity when needed, it was not until I was hired at UMW in 2010 that I officially had direct reports. Furthermore, I only have two direct reports: a full-time registration assistant and a part-time registration assistant/veteran school certifying official. Consequently, structuring my team has not been very complex and has not required me to be too creative. Even though we are only a group of three, I still hold monthly meetings where I give each individual the opportunity to create the agenda and openly discuss any matters that may be of concern to them. While I consider this simple structure (Bolman & Deal, 2017) to be effective, I realize that it has limited my experience designing other types of structures. Fortunately, I have been able to experience creating different types of structures from the vantage point of being a direct report myself.

With a staff of 12, my supervisor oversees three managers (of which I am one) that each have several direct reports. Since I have had the same supervisor these past ten years at UMW, I have been able to assist her when she needs to restructure our office. One reason that often causes the need for restructuring is when a technological advancement brings about an

improvement in an area of operation in our office. As such, she has the ability to realize that the division of labor and responsibilities should be reevaluated to ensure that resources are being used in the right areas. By soliciting my opinion as well as the opinions of the other two managers in our office, she is able to gather more information and create a collaborative restructuring process. Although the final decisions are ultimately up to her, she serves as a coach and mentor to me and the other managers by actively including us in the decision-making process. Even though the Ed.D. program pushes me to focus on my own leadership style, this is a good reminder to take note of the leadership style of others in my organization to serve as inspiration.

Conclusion

Much like parenting, I believe leadership provides individuals opportunities to grow personally as well as serve as role models for those that look to them for guidance. Each role is demanding and constantly evolving. As situation and circumstances change, new and different challenges present themselves. Analyzing my own leadership behaviors and actions through the four frames of Bolman and Deal has enabled me to specifically identify areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Moving forward, I need to focus on balancing the human resource, political, symbolic, and structural frames in order to become the leader that I aspire to be. The ultimate goal is fluid expertise, the sort of know-how that lets you think on the fly and navigate organizations as easily as you drive home on a familiar route (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 13). My goal is to maintain my current leadership style reflective of the human resource and political frames while also challenging myself to engage in new behaviors that are called for when elements of the symbolic

and structural frames are needed. As I continue to improve my knowledge base with regard to different leadership and management theories, I am confident that I will reach this goal.

Similar to how I feel as a parent, the leader I was ten years ago is very different from the leader I am today. Even though I feel much more capable as a leader than I have ever felt before, there is still a picture that exists in my mind of the leader that I wish to be. Like nearly any important role that an individual takes on in life, there will always be opportunities to learn and grow in order to turn aspirations into reality.

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