Bottom Up and Top-Down approaches to school management: Lessons from Primary Schools in Chadiza District, Eastern Province, Zambia

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Abstract

This paper shares detailed insights into primary school management in Chadiza District in Eastern Province of Zambia. It provides a critical review of both top down and bottom up approaches to management, specifically focusing on primary school practices. Much of what is discussed herein is anchored on phenomenological data gathered over years of teaching, interacting and supervising teachers and student teachers at primary school level of education. The paper recommends that managers of schools must not get glued to one form (top down or bottom up) but engage junior officers to promote and yield progressive academic performance on the part of learners and maintain standards of teaching and professionalism on the part of teaching staff. This, however, should not be achieved at the expense of losing grip of job and focus of the overall goal of the school.

Keywords: Primary School, School, Management, bottom-up approach, top down.

Introduction

This paper discusses bottom up and top down management styles in primary schools. It covers the following topical areas: objective; purpose; methodology; defines bottom up and top down management styles with examples given where appropriate; discusses the philosophical underpinning of the approaches and with examples, in some cases, and review literature thereof; argues if the two approaches are being applied in schools or not; states advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches; draws some lessons; and makes conclusions.

Objective

The main objective of the study was to investigate management styles schools use in Chadiza District in Eastern Province of Zambia.

Purpose

This paper details management styles that schools use in Chadiza District in Eastern Province of Zambia. Chadiza has teachers that trained in the olden days as well as teachers that have trained in the new era. The combination suggests, consequently, that top down and bottom up approaches of managing schools take place in the schools.

Methodology

This study used the qualitative research design, following the phenomenological research method. It covered lived experiences of head teachers in more than 10 schools where the researchers taught

before. Since uncovering lived experiences of practitioners was the sole aim of the study, phenomenology was a fitting approach to employ. Moreover, it is widely observed that a phenomenological study can generate thick descriptions of great value for understanding a problem that has not been well studied. Oftentimes, results from such studies can be very useful for scoping dimensions of an unstructured problem, gaining sufficient knowledge to then structure theory and an understanding of variables pertaining to a problem at hand (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009)

Purposive sampling was used because it allowed selecting or handpicking supposedly typical or interesting cases (Blaxter et al, 2006).

Predominantly, data was collected using interviews, document review and observations. Data was collected over the 10 years of teaching, interacting and supervising teachers and student teachers at primary school level of education. The researches thereafter employed the thematic data analysis method to present and discuss the findings.

Findings and discussions

The part of the article presents and discusses findings. They are further triangulated. After categorizing emerging findings collected into, the thematic approach of analysis was employed.

Definitions

Bottom up approach

The bottom-up approach, like the word suggests, is a process by which management information flows from grassroots to top management. A bottom-up approach is the piecing together of systems to give rise to more complex systems, thus making the original systems sub-systems of the emergent system. Bottom-up processing is a type of information processing based on incoming data from the environment (grassroots) to form a perception at top management. In a bottom-up approach the individual base element (members of staff in this case) of the system are first specified in great detail. These elements are then linked together to form larger subsystems, which then in turn are linked, sometimes in many levels, until a complete top-level system is formed. In essence, therefore, what is received as singular is broadened by top management and spread down or horizontally in order to achieve the goal of an organization. In this system, a concept is conceived at grassroots, digested and submission is made to top management. If top management sees it appropriate, it is sent down for action.

Top down

In the top down approach, the flow of information is from the top management down to the grass root. This is a situation where top management may conceive an idea, and then it is taken down to the grass root teams to ponder it. The top management then receives a feedback from the bottom or grass roots to help them make a decision that will be integral in nature.

Suffice to say that top-down and bottom-up are both strategies of leadership styles and knowledge ordering, used in a variety of fields including software, humanistic and scientific theories and in management and organization. In practice, they can be seen as a style of thinking, teaching, or leadership. In real meaning as a result, schools use these approaches in a day to day management of their institutions. The debate of who uses what and who does not use what comes in with the individual's training that he/she obtained. It is correct to state that some managers use both approaches in the management styles and they succeed.

Philosophical underpinning and review of literature

The bottom up or top down system of management is the flow of information from top management down to the subordinates while the bottom-up approach is a system which entails flow of information from bottom to the top management. This suggests that in this system of management, the departments are either not made use of or are made use of, as information flows directly from top to bottom or from bottom to top management. The olden management liked using the top down, mechanical way, of handling issues as it gives management absolute power to making decisions. This is what also Gravett (2004) observed as he says that real conceptual change or perspective

transformation is, however, very difficult and takes a long time, which is why managerial, top-down approaches to improving quality of teaching are hard to implement. At best, there is a grudging compliance with whatever is being offered as the latest teaching innovation, but no real ongoing long-term changes will be made.

Gravett observes that this top-down management system is opposed heavily and described as hard way of improving quality of teaching. If anything, compliance is hard to do and if there is any compliance, then it is a grudging one. Otherwise people oppose it and look at it not as a good way of running the education system and that there must be some changes. While that is true Gravett's perspective, some institutions just need this type of management in order for things to run. Some people are generally full of inertia and take long to act on things. In such situations, consequently, the top down arrangement is an appropriate form of leadership style.

While this type of management gives absolute power to managers, there is a possibility that this top management is lacking real information to as what is obtaining within the teaching community. This is because of lack of consultative approach to governance. There is no deliberate policy where members of the organization at different levels can be engaged in the dialogue. For obvious reasons of wanting to protect power, maintaining the size of people in power, dominating the subordinates and issue commands at will.

Freire (1970:173) argues that the difficulty is that this category of dialogical action (like the others) cannot occur apart from the praxis. The praxis of oppression is easy (or at least not difficult) for the dominant elite; but it is not easy for the revolutionary leaders to carry out a liberating praxis. The former group can rely on using the instruments of power; the latter group has this power directed against it. The former group can organize itself freely, and though it may undergo fortuitous and momentary divisions, it unites rapidly in the face of any threat to its fundamental interests. The latter group cannot exist without the people, and this very condition constitutes the first obstacle to its efforts at organization.

While from the above discourse we see Freire discussing the elite leaders in an organization, there is a relationship that is seen between what Freire is saying and what is going on in schools whose leaders are practicing the top down type of management. The relationship is that in organization where there is freedom in coming up with decisions, it is easy for the goals to be achieved. This is because the goals are owned by people at every level and as such would want to accomplish whatever activity is entrusted with them. In other words, the general work force is motivated to push in their best energies in trying to realize the organization set goals.

On the contrary, the top down approach does not allow such maneuvers and as such it is rigid. It does not permit the input of the general working staff and it is in that sense retrogressive and unproductive. It does not encourage tapping from the vast experiences and reservoir of knowledge that lay at the grassroots with people that are thought of as not being knowledgeable.

Readers of this article should be made to appreciate the fact that in the top down and bottom up management models; top leadership is not the sole preserve of decision making. They consult the other stakeholders before decisions are arrived at. It is, however, the level of consultation and amount of openness to people being consulted that is of great influence on whether a particular approach be favored or not. Those managers that would like to have absolute power prefer the top down management style as opposed to bottom up approach.

Can top down and bottom up approaches be applied in schools?

The top-down and bottom up models of management are practiced in schools. One of the reasons for this is that we still have differently trained managers of the education system. The newly trained managers may not apply themselves in the same manner as the trained in the olden days. By this argument, you may appreciate that even the philosophies obtained are different.

Dubois (2002) argues both approaches can be found in the organization or an institution as these are involving decision making.

In bottom-up organized organizations, for example ministries and their subordinate entities, decisions are prepared by experts in their fields, which define, out of their expertise, the policy they deem necessary. If they cannot agree, even on a compromise, they *escalate* the problem to the next

higher hierarchy level, where a decision would be sought. Finally, the highest common principal might have to take the decision. Information is in the debt of the inferior to the superior, which means that the inferior owes information to the superior. In the effect, as soon as inferiors agree, the head of the organization only provides his or her "face″ for the decision which their inferiors have agreed upon, (Dubois, 2002).

In Eastern Province, particularly in Chadiza District, the schools that are in remote areas, headed by old head teachers have that approach of leadership style. Often times, the head teachers are fixed and glued to guidelines and never bend. The use of threats, rush in charging erring teachers and calls for transfer for anyone who questions his or her supremacy is the order of the day. Such schools are less productive and allow less fresh ideas. If, for example, you check on the performance of the school, the highest score does not exceed 50%. Sadly, such schools remain with few staff and standards are often times compromised. What makes the situation even worse is that standards officers hardly reach out such schools.

In the opposite, the township schools' administration is based on a top-down approach, where general teaching staff enjoys no other task than simply to execute decisions made by their superiors. As those superiors also require consultation, this consultation is provided by members of staff or heads of department. The deputy head teachers or senior teachers sit together to formulate the guidelines which everybody follows. This approach is not only preferred and good but also productive.

In schools where there is little consultation from the departments, primary or secondary, the aspect of domination is there. Such leaders, in addition, are protecting their positions and power, and they would rather make threats in issuing out instructions. They make sure that there are no groupings among the departments and or from within members of departments that emerge to question their authority. It would indeed be inconsistent of the dominant elite (top management) to allow the leaders in departments to organize. The internal unity of the dominant elite, which reinforces and organizes its power, requires that the people be divided; the unity of the leaders only exists in the unity of the people among themselves and in turn with them. The unity of the elite derives from its *antagonism* with the people; the unity of the revolutionary leadership group grows out of communion with the (united) people. This concept is well understood by the top down model of leadership and it is well harnessed.

According to Huber (2004), when schools are regarded as learning organizations, it implies that the stakeholders should be given the necessary power and they should operate in cooperation. In brief Huber (2004) said that "Leadership is about empowering others as viable partners in leadership". In a school set up, there are a lot of structures that need to be paid attention to. Freedom given to such people in these lower but viable ranks, if well utilized can produces a lot of good results.

From what Huber says, for example, it is clear that the top down leadership is not a good leadership style and hence such managers need to transform. They indeed need to adopt a modern leadership style, which is ruling through departments. Spillane (2005) also mentions the different terminologies used to describe distributed leadership and these are cooperative leadership, democratic leadership and emergent concepts known as organizational-educational management.

In the top down management style, skills cannot be shared between management and subordinates and amongst subordinates themselves. It does not promote team work and problem solving is at individual capacity. Further challenge is that this style has its employees' morale low and this in turn affects production. The way employees are handled has a great impact on the performance of workers and this is the core engine for high production.

In situations where top down management is promoted, work suffers a great deal. This is because when people that are entrusted to do a particular work are committed elsewhere, work stalls up until their commitment is over. This is all because they have not shared the work with the other colleagues and as such, they (colleagues) do not know what to do in their absence. Although many reforms are being made by governments and changes are imposed from above and outside, there is also a wish for change within schools so as to improve teaching and learning. The managers, generally, have the task of driving changes and teachers have the responsibility for implementing those changes. This structure brings about the necessity for middle managers to bring about the link between Rectors

(Principals) and classroom teachers. In secondary schools these middle managers are presented as Head of Departments (HODs) and other such post so that leadership responsibilities are distributed and thus bringing not only cooperation but also helping the Rectors in their duties (Dinham, 2007).

Application of top down or bottom-up approaches by school administrators (HoDs Head, Deputy Head & Senior Teachers)

The HoDs have some formal duties and responsibilities assigned to them. They are accountable for their departments and they exert their influences both horizontally and vertically. This is further extended within and beyond the department and school (Dinham, 2007). In larger secondary schools, the teaching and learning of hundreds of students depend on his competences. The role of the HoDs, can be divided into two namely; the internal and external roles. The internal role includes the allocation of classes to staff; the allocation of resources; coordinator; monitor of standards; delegator of responsibilities to others in the department. The external role includes developing and maintaining good working relationships with other HoDs, other educators, the inspectorate, school panels, Senior management Teams and the governors or managers (Turner, 2005).

In a similar vein, the head teachers, deputy head teachers and senior teachers have such a mammoth task too. They have to attend to internal daily duties; class allocations, supervision, control of pupil movement, cleanliness of environment to state but a few examples. At the same time, they have a big task of coordinating the outside teams that visit the school for one reason or the other. While the HoD's work may be narrow, the Head teacher's job with colleagues is heavier and more demanding. It requires a lot of courtesy as well as tact. This is because these are dealing with different publics.

Advantages of using top down or bottom-up approaches

In particular, the advantage of the bottom-up approach is the level of expertise provided, combined with the motivating experience of any member of the administration to be responsible and finally the independent "engine" of progress in that field of personal responsibility.

The advantage of the top-down principle on the other hand is that political and administrative responsibilities are clearly distinguished from each other, and that responsibility for political failures can be clearly identified with the relevant office holder.

Disadvantages of using top down or bottom-up approaches

A serious disadvantage that top down model has is the lack of democratic control and transparency, this leading, from a democratic viewpoint, to the deferment of actual power of policy-making to faceless, if even known, public servants. Even the fact that certain managers might "provide their face" to the actual decisions of their inferiors might not mitigate this effect, but rather strong legislative rights of control and influence in procedures thereof.

Another problem that is possible with the top down management approach in this era is that it bleeds suspicion in the minds of some employees and this brings about nagging and bragging attitude within an institution. This slows down work and, in the end, produces low pass rates. This situation can be noticed even by the external people and this may hinder people's participation in developing the school. The danger in letting the external people start suspecting the school management does not only affect the people present in that particular school, it is generalized to a larger constituent of school managers or rather head teachers. To clean this mess, it would take considerably long time and it would also require patience and persistence on the people that would want to induce positivity in the minds of the people from the immediate community.

Further disadvantages of this top down are that the system triggers dehumanization of subordinates, who know that their ideas to improve school might not be welcome just because of their position, and that the decision-makers cannot make use of the full range of expertise which their juniors will have collected during their long trainings.

Administrations in *dictatorships* traditionally work according to a strict top-down approach. As civil servants below the level of the political leadership are discouraged from making suggestions, they to suffer from the lack of expertise which could be provided by the inferiors, which regularly

leads to a breakdown of the system after a few decades. Modern forms therefore prefer to define a framework of permissible, or even encourage, criticism and self-determination by junior staff, which would not affect the major state doctrine, but allows the use of professional and expertise-driven knowledge and the use of it for the decision-making persons in office.

As we wrap up the bottom up, top down or indeed vertical approach to management, it is, to a larger extent, detrimental to the school system. It is requiring that such approaches be changed and bring in a new way of managing school called the horizontal management style. Some of the effects include communication break-down, work stalling, none sharing of skills and bleeding suspicions. Others are promoting isolated manner of doing work, conservativeness, exploitative and lack of transparency and accountability. Mintzberg (2004) asserts that terms such as bosses and subordinates are becoming outdated. He mentioned that instead, the relation should be shifted to colleagues and partners, sideways and not hierarchical. Nominated leaders are needed in the web to unite and be part of the cause rather than to give orders and supervise. Successful leadership is more about inspiring than empowering; more about connecting than controlling; more about demonstrating than decision-making. And all this is done by full engagement, a great deal more than anyone else.

Horizontal school engagement: merits and demerits

This entails flow of information from top management to all middle management members or the other way around. This is not a favored manner of leadership by people that would like to enjoy massive control over teachers or indeed employees in a big organization. The approach has a great deal of benefits in that it is inclusive and allows for changes in tactics in accomplishing tasks. The skills are shared and people are free to take decisions. This helps in the school to run smoothly and fast.

Distributed leadership: merits and demerits

Variations occur according to the degree of involvement of informal leaders in the practice of distributed leadership. It may come from a 'top down' initiative who acknowledge such type of leadership relationships within the community or from a 'bottom up' initiative through individuals or groups inside the organization who are perceived by others as having a leadership role (Bennet et al., 2003).

Indeed (Bennet et al., 2003) scored a very powerful point in the discourse. He said that the changes to distributive leadership style can be initiated by the top managers or indeed from the bottom. It is however stating the fact that the people have been perceived as having the leadership tenets. It should however, be noted that not all top leaders may see such changes as necessary. They would rather see it as changes that may demean them in their roles.

Another benefit of this horizontal leadership style is that it is dynamic and it promotes team work. Team work emphasizes on collaboration, multiple and complementary strengths and expertise, and it is also necessary for all members to have the same view of the purposes of the team and its ways of working. All these characteristics have correspondence to a great extent of the opinions about distributed leadership (Karkkainen, 2000). Moreover, researchers often differentiate between two types of teams namely the formally structured teams and those which are formed for a particular purpose to carry out specific projects. Both styles mutually function best in an open environment, where the relationships are founded on trust, mutual protection and support (Bennet et al., 2003).

From the team work perspective, a lot of issues have been discussed. One of the issues discussed is the fact that all members are required to dip into the philosophy of the team and work as such. There is sharing or complementing of skills and strengths, a thing that not only promotes unit but also produces quality results. The atmospheres within which work is done is friendly and people under such conditions work even outside the stipulated times set for them to work. The results of the horizontal or distributive leadership style are excellent.

Another positive element about horizontal leadership style is that it may be practiced through a long-term institutional form with team structures and committees. On the other hand, the literature also revealed the existence of a strong theme of fluid leadership, based on know-how rather than the stance and which function according to varying ad hoc groups formed on the account of immediate

and appropriate expertise. Such leadership will only be possible within an atmosphere of trust and mutual support which in turn becomes an integral part of the internal organizational, social and cultural context (Bennet et al., 2003).

Indeed, successful teams and the practice of distributed leadership should provide for means to face and to resolve conflicts. Such an approach may have to function in a much larger sphere than would be required by smaller teams. The conflict resolution approach can be hierarchical, headed by a sole leader, or more mutually respectful, through united or collective leadership, depending on the motives and on the degree of hierarchy.

Distributed leadership is beneficial in many ways. It gives recognition to individuals in both formal and informal positions to be responsible for leadership activities via a network of interactions.

Based on that point above, horizontal leadership plays a part in the stable improvement of schools in domains like high levels of both student skills and achievements. Accordingly, horizontal leadership is recognized as a collective leadership where teachers became experts by working in collaboration since connecting people in the leadership activity is the essence of horizontal leadership practice. Such a practice greatly encourages teacher participation and dedication, and Gamage et al. (2009) asserts that the transparency and efficiency of team management show the way to development of the processes, content, and outcomes of both teaching and learning.

Accordingly, in participative leadership settings, decision-making processes of the group have to be the fundamental focus of the group. This 'normative model' is supported by three criteria namely: school effectiveness is improved by participation; Participation comprises of democratic ideologies and any lawful stakeholder is eligible to the Leadership position. Participative approach of leadership thrives in bonding personnel together and in attenuating the pressures on school principals.

The burdens of leadership will decrease only when leadership functions and roles are shared and the concept of leadership density emerged as a feasible replacement for principal leadership (Bush, 2003).

As elaborated above, distributed leadership has been very popular and largely adopted in the professional world during the past decade. However, a large amount of the discussion is 'prescriptive', that is it is based on ideals rather than data. Both theory and empirical study propose to be cautious with such an approach as "there is a time and a place for sharing leadership". Guidance should be sought to better understand when and how to share leadership for learning. Yet when being in the right hands, shared leadership is a powerful tool for expanding the school's capacity to achieve its vision and create its own desired future. It is worth noting that research does recommends that even if policy measures supports shared leadership, the principal's own leadership is crucial in developing the leadership of others (Hallinger, 2011).

It should observed that no matter what the future might consider for the idea of distributed leadership, yet, the prospect to ponder on its history and scholarly uptake has consolidated the argument that distributed leadership has contributed to an improved understanding and appraising of the work of schools and it has been both perceptive good and productive.

Critical reflection

There is a need to redefine the nature of leadership, management and governance in schools. From the above discourses on effective leadership in schools, we can tell that the authority to lead may not inevitably be situated in the person of the leader but may be scattered inside the school among different people. Therefore, Leadership is not centered in a person or an office but in the people within the organization.

The school leaders must bear in mind, too, that schools are places where leadership actions are distributed and diffused across the whole school system. Every member of staff must be responsible for leading his or her practice. Moreover, the school leaders must be attentive to the fact that individual schools are now working in collaboration with other schools in their locality or with other agencies and professionals. Networks are being formed. Consequently, traditional beliefs that learning is developed only in the classroom or only in the hands of the school principal should be replaced with the concept of extended and multi-professional practice.

Considering and undertaking this distributed or horizontal leadership in its totality will help schools in being highly productive. This will help in mapping such schools national wide.

Lessons learnt and way forward

There are a lot of lessons that can be drawn from the discourses above. One of them is that there forms of management undertaken in schools are varied. While some prefer a top down management system, others on the other hand use the bottom up form. There are merits and demerits in the use of either style of leadership. A clever manager will prefer to use both styles in order for work to move. The situations at hand should dictate what form of management style has to be used.

Another lesson that was learnt is that greater productivity is associated with distributed leadership or the bottom up approach of the leadership. The top down approach on the contrary produces among other things the teacher resentment, low production, suspicion and slow rate of doing things. There is however a positive aspect of it where originality of policy is concerned. No distortions can be experienced as the recipient is the same person that transfers the information.

Conclusion

In the vertical engagement or rather top down management style, flow of information is from the top leadership to the bottom or subordinates. It entails that much of the thinking is done at top management and decisions are made right at the top.

This gives absolute power to top management and issues of dialogue are almost none existent. It is noted that such approaches deny top management skills and no strengths were pooled apart from the fact that the preservation of originality of shape of the organization is maintained. Often times, work suffers a great deal if the persons delegated to do the job is committed elsewhere. This form of management is practiced in most of the schools in Chadiza District and more so in the rural areas.

The horizontal engagement or bottom up is seen as a fabulous manner of leadership which should be promoted in schools. This ensures skills are being shared, strengths pooled together, and a great understanding of the set goals rife. Workers do the work with high morale and the productivity levels are high. The approach promotes networks within and outside the school system and this entails continued learning taking place even outside learning time. It builds team work and this reduces burden or pressure on top leadership.

All in all, the essay was highly educative and cognizance should be taken on the fact that, if leaders in schools would engage themselves in studying such topics in detail, their schools' performance would greatly improve. There is no sure way of understanding leadership styles better than studying such and engaging in books containing such themes.

It is the head teacher who organizes the time-table and distribute work load. However, the head teacher alone cannot change everything; teachers and external partners are important stakeholders. Head teachers lead instruction at school, help teachers develop instructional strategies and techniques and encourages teamwork, ensure in - service training and plan for seminars for his staff, assemble resources and distribute them to benefit the students, maintain a well - balanced staff with multiple techniques and competencies, establish goals for the school and articulate those goals with clarity, conviction and understanding (Hopkins, 2005). A teacher is a key resizing actor. A school is a reflection of the quality of the teachers it has and transformation can only occur with good teachers. Every teacher is different and every teacher matter. Moreover, Schools cannot work in isolation. Besides the headmaster, the teacher and the students, there are also the school community comprising of parents and people at large who are engaged in providing support to the school.

All these matters raised above should not be ignored if any school has to function successfully.

Recommendations

1. Both top down and bottom up styles of leadership should be used in schools in Chadiza District depending on the situation at play.
2. The managers of schools must not get glued to one form (top down or bottom up) but that a great deal in using the junior officers promote huge results. It should however not be at the expense of losing grip of job and focus of the overall goal of the school.

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