How Leaders Communicate their Vulnerability:

Implications for Trust Building

Proposal submitted for the AERA annual meeting 2015

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Abstract

For leaders to resolve concerns that hinder more equitable schooling outcomes, collaboration of staff is often essential. The basis for collaboration is trust, and trust can be defined as the intention to accept vulnerability. Showing vulnerability enables more trusting relationships and collaboration, especially in relationships of unequal power. We identified the interpersonal behaviors that communicate vulnerability and studied their occurrence in conversations that 27 leaders held with the person involved in a concern that they sought to resolve. We found little evidence that leaders showed vulnerability to others in their conversations. Given the importance of trust as a resource for school improvement, leadership development needs to include opportunities for leaders to build trust by experiencing and communicating genuine vulnerability.

Purposes

In pursuit of more equitable schooling, educational leaders must resolve the many barriers to its achievement, by involving and listening to the diverse views of those whose efforts are required to achieve this goal. Trust is the basis for inclusive and effective decisions about how to reduce such barriers, yet building trust in relationships of unequal power and authority is especially challenging (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Simpson, 2007). While research has identified broad determinants of trust such as benevolence, competence, honesty, openness, respect, integrity and authenticity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2004), there is little research which provides behavioral evidence of the
specific interpersonal practices leaders need to build relational trust in conversations in which concerns are addressed (Sasaki & Marsh, 2012).

The purpose of this research is to examine interpersonal practices that could be powerful generators of trust in the context of leaders’ conversations about a work-related concern. Since the conversation is with the person the leader believes is implicated in the concern, the issue of trust is highly salient. Trusting relationships are reciprocal, as each party has to display trust in the other person to be trusted themselves. When each party trusts the other, they are more likely to disclose more accurate, relevant and complete data about the concern as well as their own ideas, thoughts and feelings. They are also more likely to admit mistakes or inactions (Wrightsman, 1974; Zand, 1972). This creates the conditions in which the responsibility for concerns and concern resolution can be openly shared (Simpson, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2004; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

Trust, in this paper, is defined as the behavioral intention to accept vulnerability (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Being vulnerable means taking a risk, by exposing one’s own weakness or mistake, and anticipating a positive reaction rather than an abuse of the information relayed (Zand, 1972). Trust is thus not taking risk as such, but it is a willingness to take risks (Mayer et al., 1995). Our interest lies in how leaders can reduce the other’s sense of vulnerability in conversations by showing vulnerability themselves (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007).

**Theoretical framework**

Drawing on empirical leadership research on trust and interpersonal effectiveness (Argyris, 1978; Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Colquitt et al., 2007; Daly, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2004), we examined vulnerability as a lever for trust. We
focused on two interpersonal practices that communicate leaders’ vulnerability. Firstly, leaders need to recognize their own contribution to a concern, thus becoming aware of their own vulnerability (Zand, 1972). Those in positions of authority need to acknowledge vulnerabilities to be able to relieve the tensions created by the differential power relationship (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Whitener et al., 1998). Secondly, leaders need to disclose how they themselves may have contributed to the situation that concerns them, by, for example, not giving sufficient support or by reacting ineffectively to the other person. By disclosing their contribution, leaders expose their vulnerability and thus ‘invite’ the other person to be vulnerable, take risks and communicate openly. The other party will have less fear that if they in turn expose information, feelings or thoughts that these will be abused. They will therefore be more receptive to influence from others (Mayer et al., 1995). The disclosure of vulnerability can thus enable trust, and with that, can lead to collaborative and effective concern resolution (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Colquitt et al., 2007).

The current study examined whether leaders show vulnerability in conversations that are intended to resolve concerns that are important to them. Our specific research questions were:

1. How do leaders describe their own contribution to the concerns they hold about others?

2. To what extent do leaders disclose their own contribution in a conversation with the party involved in the concern?
**Methods and data sources**

The sample comprised current and aspiring leaders ($n = 27$) who participated in a postgraduate educational leadership course. The majority of participants were aged 30-50 years, approximately two-thirds were female, and most were in a team leader or senior leader role. Leaders were asked to identify a concern they had in their educational work context (e.g. early childhood, elementary, high school) with another person and to complete a template about the concern, including one question that required them to describe in a short paragraph how they might have contributed to it. Most of the 27 concerns were about the other’s teaching, relationships with students and colleagues, or effectiveness in non-teaching aspects of their jobs.

The participants were then given approximately three weeks to seek written consent from the person involved (e.g. teacher, parent, senior manager) and, if granted, to record a conversation about their concern. Leaders transcribed their own conversations and were asked to annotate the transcript with any thoughts and feelings they had during the conversation but did not express at the time (procedure adapted from Argyris and Schön (1974)).

The analysis of the template focused on whether leaders described some contribution to the concern they held. Coding categories were developed through iterative explorations of themes inherent in the data. If descriptions contained references to different themes, they were multi-coded to avoid arbitrary decisions about the main focus of the statement. A second trained coder independently coded the statements. The inter-coder agreement score was a satisfactory .82 (Krippendorf’s alpha).
The annotated transcripts were used to analyze leaders’ unspoken thoughts and feelings as well as their actual speech in regard to two coding categories 1) own contribution acknowledged in leader’s thoughts but not disclosed, 2) own contribution disclosed in actual speech. Of predominant interest was the second coding category as this behavior was the main indicator of communicating vulnerability. Annotations and sections of transcript that did not hold any information about the leader’s contribution to the concern were not coded. Further thematic analysis examined how the other party reacted to leader’s disclosure. The inter-coder agreement score for the coding of the relevant sections of thoughts and speech was an acceptable .78 (Krippendorf’s alpha).

**Findings**

When prompted to describe their contribution to the concern on the template, seventeen of the 27 leaders were able to do so and ten did not describe any contribution to the concern (see Table 1 and Appendix A).
Table 1.

Number and Percentage of Mentions of Contribution Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution described</th>
<th>Number of leaders</th>
<th>Type of contribution</th>
<th>Number of contributions</th>
<th>Percentage of contributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes*</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Insufficient or inappropriate monitoring or support</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidance of discussion of the concern</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear communication of concern</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other person/other factors caused concern</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No contribution described</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Statements of 17 leaders were multi-coded, thus percentages do not round up to 100%

The most common ways in which leaders reported they had contributed to a concern was through insufficient oversight or support and by avoiding talking about the issue. A few leaders described how they contributed to the concern by not clearly communicating their concern to the other person. Some leaders mentioned more than one way they had contributed to the concern.

Rather than acknowledging any contribution, seven leaders described how the concern was caused by the other person involved or by factors outside of their control (e.g. own age or gender). Another three leaders described the general situation in which the concern had arisen. In summary, seventeen leaders described ways in which they contributed to the concern and were thus aware of their vulnerability prior to the conversation. However, we
saw little evidence in the conversations of leaders displaying vulnerability to the other person by disclosing their contribution.

Five leaders had recognized their contribution to the concern in their thoughts, but they did not disclose these to the other person in the actual conversation.

*Feel guilty it’s no wonder you’re frustrated* (case #20, annotated thoughts)

*I should really have researched this further.* (case #16, annotated thoughts)

Eight leaders disclosed their views on how they had contributed to the concern. Some of those leaders also recognized their contribution in their annotated thoughts, so their vulnerability was both recognized and communicated:

*I was meant to do this a few weeks ago and didn’t…I better fess up!* (case #19, annotated thoughts)

*So if it’s planning and you want some help with it, then that’s my job and I get to come in and help with that. I did say I would do that didn’t I and I never did.* (case #19, actual speech)

Some of the transcripts showed how such disclosure prompted reciprocal disclosure and more information about the concern and its causes was shared:

*Leader: That’s my fault as well. I didn’t realize that emailing the Heads of Faculty was an inappropriate thing to do.* (case #25, actual speech)

*Other party: I think the mistake rests with me because I should have completed the cycle of communication and I didn’t. I made a mistake when I talked with [name of third person] and just clarified my position, I said that I would talk to you and I haven’t done that.* (case #25, actual speech)

Thematic analyses of transcripts and concern statements of leaders who had not disclosed their contribution suggested two possible reasons for their non-disclosure. First, leaders tended not to disclose their contribution when they felt insecure in their role or in their position of authority. An example:
It’s all very well me giving advice but I need to role-model it too. I’m nervous about being the new Head of Faculty and being younger and a lesser-experienced teacher. (Case #2, annotated thoughts)

This suggests that it is more difficult for leaders to show vulnerability in relationships in which their authority is threatened or not fully established. It confirms earlier research that trust is more difficult to develop in relationships in which power differentials are salient (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The second possible reason for not disclosing their contribution was that leaders tended to jump towards the discussion of solution strategies rather than to focus on the concern itself or the causes of the concern. Discussing solutions is more predictable and less distressing than talking about causes of concerns which might involve discussion of the others’ and one’s own mistakes or failures.

**Scholarly significance**

Our research offers rare data about how current and aspiring educational leaders acknowledge and communicate their own contribution to concerns that need addressing in their organization. In contrast to most research on leaders’ interpersonal practices, our data was collected through real conversations in which leaders attempted to address their concerns with relevant colleagues rather than through scenarios and individual reflections.

While trust is often defined as one’s willingness to participate in a relationship that involves being vulnerable to another person (Daly, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2009), there is little discussion in the literature about the specific practices that leaders should engage in to show vulnerability, and even less evidence about whether they do engage in such practices. The present research identified specific trust building practices and examined the extent to which leaders engaged in them. Furthermore, our data reveals links between communicating
vulnerability and the more open and trusting reactions of the other party in these real conversations.

Our findings show that even though leaders recognized their contribution to a concern when prompted, there was little evidence that they thought about their contribution or showed vulnerability in their actual conversations. The comparison between leaders’ descriptions of their concerns, their thoughts and their actual speech provided clues about the difficulties leaders perceived when attempting to show vulnerability. The notion of vulnerability, while discussed in the trust literature, needs to inform leadership development and leadership development research, as vulnerabilities need to be recognized by those in positions of authority in order to reduce the tensions that prevent greater trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Whitener et al., 1998). The interpersonal practices we looked for in leaders’ conversations could lead, in the short run, to more open communication about concerns and more collaborative concern resolution. In the long run, such behaviors could foster a climate of trust, which contributes to organizational effectiveness, collaboration, engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors, and more equitable schooling outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).
References


**Appendix A**

**Coding Rules for Leaders’ Contribution to the Concern**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance (not voiced concern)</td>
<td>Describes own contribution as having avoided to address the concern. Has not communicated or disclosed their concern to the other person involved.</td>
<td>&quot;I have contributed to the concern because I have not discussed it with XXX or anyone else in an attempt to improve the situation&quot;; &quot;there has been an element of laissez-faire thinking that it was not a huge issue and the problem will disappear&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient or inappropriate monitoring or support</td>
<td>Describes own contribution to the concern as having missed to monitor the other person's work and work outcomes sufficiently or missed to give sufficient and appropriate support, guidance or help or missed to monitor to the person involved.</td>
<td>&quot;I question how much support I have been to the team leader.&quot; &quot;I have not given the Tutor Teacher enough guidance in her role.&quot; &quot;I could have been more exhaustive in the way I carried out the performance appraisal last year. I could have picked up those 'signs' earlier and started working on resolving the issues.&quot; &quot;By not checking to see if the teacher had reviewed their learning goals from the previous year&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear communication of concern</td>
<td>Describes own contribution to the concern as having not communicated the concern clearly to the other person.</td>
<td>&quot;By not making it clear enough in the past about my concerns regarding his destructive behaviour.&quot; &quot;In my initial conversations around my concerns about low levels of achievement I may have gone in too softly and/or pussy footed around without being clear.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other person/other factors caused concern</td>
<td>When prompted to describe own contribution to the concern, the person names contributing factors he or she had no control over (e.g. own attributes). No responsibility is taken for the concern; rather the person's description is defensive.</td>
<td>&quot;The very 1st reason for the manager not trusting me enough is because as the team leader of the U2 area, I am young &amp; I don't have any child of my own.&quot; &quot;I ask too many questions for understanding and people often think I am doing this to be disruptive.&quot; &quot;I gave her ideas and supported by modelling, thinking back she started to rely on me too much rather than taking the initiative.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No contribution described</td>
<td>When prompted to describe own contribution to the concern, the person states no clear contribution, but describes the general situation.</td>
<td>&quot;I was her support person as the NZEI rep when she felt malignant by the Principal in 2012 and also her team leader when appraising early in 2012.&quot;</td>
</tr>
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