Leadership Solutions for a For-Profit Secondary School in Vietnam

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The opportunity to attend a university and pursue higher education is a dream that is shared by many high school students and their parents all over the world. Students from developing countries have long studied in the west, but the number of students from developing counties that hope to study in the west has risen considerably in recent years. However, there is often a significant difference in the secondary curriculum in developing countries and the secondary curriculum in western countries which can cause difficulties for students that are new to a more western oriented education. In response to this situation many developing countries have seen an increase in privately owned schools that aim to prepare local students at the secondary level for academic success in western universities. However, many local investors face numerous difficulties in establishing a secondary school with a western curriculum in their countries (Vietnam, 2007). One school that is attempting to face these challenges and provide a western secondary curriculum to local students that hope to study in the west is School X (name changed).

School X is a three year old, private, for-profit secondary school in Vietnam and all of the investors, board members and the school director are Vietnamese nationals that have been educated primarily in Vietnam. The principal and most of the teachers at School X are nationals of western countries and they have been educated in, and hold teaching credentials from, western countries. The overwhelming majority of the students at School X are Vietnamese nationals that are experiencing both English-medium instruction and a western curriculum for the first time in their academic lives. As might be expected, there have been quite a few issues related to leadership at School X. However, effective leadership and a more non-traditional leadership model may provide solutions for School X.

School X is both a business and a school and while profiting from education is not an entirely new concept, there has been little research into for-profit education at the secondary level, especially in schools located in developing nations. However, it seems that for-profit secondary schools might be able to learn a lot from the healthcare industry. Summers and Nowicki (2005) noted the following:

… that in traditional businesses, the mission, vision, and values derive from the organization’s managers, owners, and board …, [but in healthcare] the public generally, most of the employees, and many of the board members think the mission, vision, and values … derive from the healing ethic, from traditions with roots in medicine and clinical practices, not in business practices.

Despite the fact that School X has been in operation for three years, to date the school does not have a mission statement and as a result little progress has been made in developing a curriculum that is oriented towards western university preparation and appropriate for students that are new to English-medium instruction and the different pedagogy and methodology that is favored in western countries. At least part of the reason why School X has not been able to formulate a mission statement is reflected in what Summers and Nowicki (2005) said in the above about healthcare. School X is not a traditional business and many of the stakeholders in School X have different opinions about where the mission, vision and values for School X should come from.
In for-profit western education in a developing country, the role of the teacher is not entirely dissimilar to that of a physician in a hospital. In a hospital the “moral compass rests with the clinical staff” (Summers & Nowicki, 2005). The “moral compass” of a school that claims to prepare students for western universities should perhaps rest with those who are most familiar with what exactly that means; the teachers and the principal. Were the director, board members and investors to align their “moral compass” with the teaching ethic and be “perceived as part of their team” (2005) then perhaps teachers, just like physicians, would be far more likely to support decisions that came from the board (Summers & Nowicki, 2005).

Perhaps the most important people in School X that can help to align the moral compass of the school and work towards providing western university preparation that is appropriate for students that are new to English-medium instruction and the different pedagogy and methodology that is favored in western countries are the school’s principal and the director. However, the director and the principal face numerous obstacles that stem from not only differing ideas about leadership, but also culture. The director received her position partly because of her personal financial investment in the school, and also because she has a background in managing private language schools. In contrast, the principal received her position partly because she is believed to possess characteristics that will enable her to function as a bridge between the teachers and the board and because she has a background in educational leadership in the United States and abroad.

The two central leadership figures in School X view their positions very differently. The director is a manager, she operates based on what she can count, control and program (Fairholm, 2004). The director is rarely seen by teachers and she relies on the principal to communicate all school related matters with the teachers. The principal is forward-thinking and tries to motivate and inspire (Fairholm, 2004), although not always effectively owing at least partially to factors that may be beyond her control. The principal is most likely leading from a perspective that is somewhere between Fairholm’s (2004) scientific management perspective and excellence management perspective. However, she has expressed goals that reflect values leadership (2004).

In determining the principal’s leadership perspective and comparing her with the tools and behaviors for each of Fairholm’s (2004) leadership perspectives, firstly, the principal measures, appraises and rewards individual performance to some extent. She also spends a lot of time organizing and planning and works to create or improve processes and has an open-door policy where she will listen to concerns from teachers. Also, she has a personal vision for the school and is moving towards values leadership by trying to set and enforce values, but she has met this task with some difficulty. Her vision is not universally shared and in order to set values for the school, those values need to be at least partially shared by all of the stakeholders and as the director and board members have positional superiority to the principal, but tend to be more managers than leaders, the principal faces numerous obstacles because of the limits on her authority and inability to determine a common set of values for all of the stakeholders.

Another factor that contributes to the principal’s ability to lead is that she has not been at School X for a very long time. The current principal replaced the former principal in the second semester of the 2009-2010 academic year, so she has only been in the position for one semester. When the new principal replaced the former principal, the teachers, director and board all had very high expectations for her. It is fairly remarkable that she has been able to do as much as she has in such a short time and it is to
her credit as a leader.

The challenges that the principal now faces in setting and enforcing values for the school that will lead to aligning the moral compass of the school and working towards providing western university preparation that is appropriate for students that are new to English-medium instruction and the different pedagogy and methodology that is favored in western countries may well be accomplished if she begins to assert expert and referent power (Green, 1999). If the principal can establish her credibility as an expert with all of the stakeholders and present arguments that are logical and persuasive and if she can create a friendlier environment in her dealings with the stakeholders (Green, 1999), then it is likely that the relationship between the director and the principal will be more conducive and that a common set of values that can lead to the development of a mission statement, that serves as the solid foundation for School X, could be developed.

While leadership at School X faces many challenges, it seems that the new principal is the right person for the job. She has already shown, in a relatively short amount of time, that she has a leadership perspective that will enable her to meet many of School X’s challenges. Also, as School X is a fairly new and unique concept, it may make sense to follow a leadership model that is more similar to the one used in healthcare in the United States as opposed to remaining at an impasse where business and education seem irreconcilable and the school and students suffer as a result. As the principal has already shown that she is a leader with potential, time may be all it takes for her to assert her expert and referent power and lead the school to success for all of the stakeholders.

References


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