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The Politics of School Management

The study of educational leadership is embedded in management theory which, in turn, has its intellectual roots in social psychology. In spite of much excellent work in this field...there is something missing. One element in this “something” is relatively easily identified. It is that management theories of leadership are apolitical or, at least, leave the political element implicit. Organizations are characterized by micropolitical activity and leadership is to a considerable degree a political task. There is an increasing consciousness of this aspect of educational leadership...

However, having added the political dimension, there is still something else missing. For other academic approaches to leadership one has to go to history and political studies-- macropolitics this time. However, one has mainly to infer the qualities of leaders from studies of the historical and political circumstances in which they manifest themselves from biographies. It would seem that the “something” is the leader’s capacity to grasp the configuration of forces at work in the environment, to construct an achievable mission – the art of the possible – to convey this mission to others often through the skillful use of language and symbol, and to attain a commitment to the mission. Page 103

There is an extensive body of research on organizational leadership including the leadership of schools. This research emphasizes the importance of two basic leadership functions – task achievement and the fulfillment of the social needs of colleagues – as essential to effectiveness. The theory also emphasizes the contingent nature of leadership and the need to take account of forces outside the organization. However, two elements are missing from the body of research. One is the recognition of the micropolitical dimension of leadership – the models presented are a little too rational and altruistic... The other omission is the somewhat nebulous function of leadership which is the function of identifying, conceptualizing, transmitting and gaining acceptance of a mission for the school, an idea or image of where it is heading. Page 123

A number of organizational theorists have noted the importance of the symbolic dimension of leadership. Indeed it has been held by some writers that leadership is a largely symbolic activity. Even in the industrial sphere Weick noted that the manager was ‘more of an evangelist than an accountant’ and held that managerial work could be viewed as managing myths, symbols and images. Pondy argued that one of the major tasks of managers was ‘to give others a sense of understanding of what they are doing and especially to articulate it so they can communicate about the meaning of their behaviour’. If organizational theorists insist on the importance of symbolic action for industrial management, how much more significant is it for the educational manager, the head? Few heads will avoid constructing an image of the school. This will differ in the degree to which this is a deliberate and charismatic task. Page 155