AIM: An Integrated Approach to Organizational Improvement

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ABSTRACT

This concept paper is based on the new problem-solving model of Blended Leadership called Alloy Improvement Model (AIM). This model consists of an integration of change theory, leadership theory, and democratic principles and practices to form a comprehensive problem-solving strategy for organizational leaders. The utilization of AIM will assist leaders in moving from problems to solutions while engaging stakeholders in a comprehensive, efficient, inclusive, informative, integrated and transparent process.

Keywords: Leadership Style, Change, Integrated Leadership, Blended Leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for leaders of educational organizations to have knowledge of problems found within, and appropriate solutions to those problems. Unfortunately, in many cases leaders are not able to arrive at the solution because of the to be able to apply and integrate leadership theory, change theory, and a direct intervention built on democratic principles and practices related to the problem.

This paper will include a discussion of some of the most widely used leadership styles, including Situational Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership and Entrepreneurial Leadership. It will also include a discussion of change theory and interventions used to solve problems along with democratic principles and practices embedded in the comprehensive organizational improvement strategy.

2. ALLOY IMPROVEMENT MODEL

Alloy Improvement Model (AIM) is the term coined by the author of this paper to describe the integration of leadership styles with change theory and a selected intervention to solve an organizational problem. It is a form of blended leadership. The analogy of creating an alloy was used because an alloy is a mixture of two or more components that create a metal that is more durable than the single elements of which it is composed. Likewise, AIM consists of three components blended together to have a synergetic effect resulting in action more effective than the use of any one component used in isolation [1]. The first AIM component includes knowledge and expertise relative to leadership styles (theory): the second component includes knowledge and expertise relative to change (theory): and the third component includes knowledge and expertise relative to an intervention or solution of a problem. AIM was created as a solution to organizational behavior as a result of leaders' inability to take solution-based action when problem solving (Figure 1).
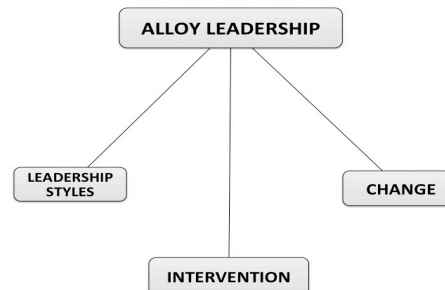

Figure 1. Alloy Improvement Model

3. INTEGRATION OF LEADERSHIP STYLES

Leadership behavior impacts effectiveness, productivity, quality, health, and job satisfaction in organizations. Successful organizational leaders have common leadership behaviors dictated by situational factors influenced by both universal and contingency aspects [2]. Situational Leadership is the underpinning of the AIM and requires a leader to assess the environment (situational factors) and select a suitable leadership approach. Situational leadership is a behavioral approach to leadership as it emphasizes the need to relate the leadership style with the maturity level of the individuals within the organization creating a dependent relationship between direction (task) and support (relation) behaviors [3, 4]. This relationship is constantly evolving and requires the leader to constantly assess both organizational tasks and individuals and adjust leadership styles according to these assessments. The same can be said for the Alloy Improvement Model as it requires leaders to constantly assess both direction and support to ensure appropriate strategies are utilized to create a culture of change.

While situational leadership is prevalent among leadership styles, Sims, Faraj, and Yun [5] provide a tactical approach that connects situational leadership to specific situations that help define how to implement this leadership style. Included in the approach are the following five steps: defining goals for a specific situation, defining potential leadership styles, identifying situational conditions, matching a leadership style to the situational conditions, and finally determining if the match between leadership style and situation was effective. These strategies align with the proposed Alloy Improvement Model (AIM) as it necessitates leadership style, change theory, and implementation of an intervention in an infinite loop. Both Sims, Faraj, and Yun's work and AIM provide a tangible model for leaders to implement.

The ability to assess others found in situational leadership is merely one of the leadership styles utilized by the Alloy Improvement Model (AIM). AIM also incorporates a servant approach within its blended leadership approach. Servant

leadership asserts that a leader serve first and through this action is then compelled to lead [6, 7]. Contrary to the leader-first approach, the focus in servant leadership is on serving individuals and ensuring their growth and success, which in turn contributes to the respective organization's success. The characteristics of Greenleaf's servant leaders were extracted by Spears [8] and include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These attributes assert the importance of a positive, constructive environment in which leaders are seen as advocates for organizational members and active participants in the execution of desired change. Leaders who do not have a serve first approach often have a difficult time achieving desired outcomes as they are usually seen from organizational members and egocentric regardless of whether or not the opinion holds merit. To maximize effectiveness, it is essential to incorporate servant leadership characteristics.

Leadership for the 21st Century. An important characteristic of an effective leader includes an understanding of the context or times in which an organization exists. A style of leadership found to be effective in today's educational environment is called Entrepreneurial Leadership. It is defined by Roebuck [9] as "organizing a group of people to achieve a common goal using proactive entrepreneurial behavior by optimizing risk, innovating to take advantage of opportunities, taking personal responsibility and managing change within a dynamic environment for the benefit of the organization." This leadership style is not limited to any one discipline.

To be successful in the 21st Century, colleges and universities must develop an entrepreneurial culture. This culture should be embraced by leaders and guided by six norms. They include: 1) developing a high level of entrepreneurialism among members of the organization, 2) employing and supporting entrepreneurial practices, 3) placing importance on innovation within the organization, 4) creating a common vision, 5) connecting organizational priorities with personal passion, and 6) developing and leveraging human capital [10].

Over the last decade colleges and universities have embraced entrepreneurialism on their campuses. They are now the largest sector receiving federal research and development grants with $36 billion in funding received in 2009 alone [11]. Furthermore, in 2011, 142 major research universities and associations submitted a written commitment to the Secretary of Commerce to support innovative entrepreneurial activities on their campus. As a result, colleges and universities are now investing heavily in the development of both student and faculty entrepreneurial endeavors (Table 1) [12].

Table 1

Sampling of Entrepreneurial University Projects

University	Project Description Summary
Rice University	Leads a business plan contest
University of Colorado	Awards a degree constructed around a multi-disciplinary team and coursework approach
University of Florida	Created an integrated entrepreneurial and academic residential facility
University of Illinois	Coordinates the drafting of patent applications for student inventions by their law students
University of Nebraska	Supports new companies based on the innovations developed at their medical school
University of North Carolina	Supports internships and fellowships for students working in university technology transfer offices
University of Southern California	Encourages student and faculty entrepreneurial leadership through recognition, rewards and funding
University of Washington	Conducts a multi-year business plan competition

While a relatively new leadership theory, Entrepreneurial Leadership is now an essential component of AIM because of its emphasis on creative solutions to facilitate funding, support, recognition, and new ideas.

4. TRANSFORMING AN ORGANIZATION

There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and team performance, work adjustment, and job satisfaction. Leaders who are able to express a clear understanding of where the organization is going helps to ensure common goals are met. Transformational leaders regularly praise extraordinary work and establish a climate of trust. These principles and practices also serve as a "stress buffer" that helps organizational members adjust to their work environment [13].

Effective leadership and the implementation of interventions aimed at solution of a problem usually fail not because of the lack of merit therein, but because of the lack of understanding of the dynamics of change and the resulting resistance to change generated by human nature [14]. Transformational leaders understand the dynamics of change and are able to support change at multiple levels. They integrate strategies to address change into their overall problem-solving process. These strategies, based on Kotter's eight-step change model [15], include a) creating a sense of urgency, b) setting the stage for change, c) planning, implementing and assessing the intervention, d) empowering, supporting and coaching instructors or other stakeholders to implement the solution.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INTERVENTION

When implementing an intervention, an effective leader must first be knowledgeable of multiple leadership styles and after carefully assessing culture of the particular organization, select the style most appropriate for addressing the organization and organizational problem(s) in question. The leader must also have an understanding of his/her personal traits and his/her tendency to exhibit certain behaviors along with the ability to seamlessly adapt to and adopt the behaviors of the style selected as most appropriate for organizational leadership. The leader may also consider surrounding him/herself with others who may compensate for perceived leadership deficiencies relative to organizational needs.

Of special note is the ability of the leader to communicate and problem solve. These are two skills considered essential for leaders, especially those found in the United States [2]. To solve an organizational problem, after gathering and assessing relevant data, a specific problem should be determined. The next step will be selecting an appropriate intervention that will solve the problem. The intervention will vary according to the particular problem the organization is planning to address, but once that intervention is identified, the leader must become an expert in all aspects of the intervention if not already [16]. The credibility of the leader will be lost if he/she does not attend to this important aspect of the AIM model. [17].

Integrated throughout the problem-solving process are democratic principles and practices [18]. These principles and practices should permeate every aspect of the process and utilized in concert with the leadership styles most appropriate to the organizational culture. The principles and practices should be comprehensive, efficient, inclusive, informative, integrated and logical. If utilized properly, all significant options and potential consequences (intended and unintended) will be considered, the process will include well-organized activities and cost-effective strategies, all members of the organization will be involved in determining potential solutions, and there will be open, and transparent communication with a clear message. The process will also include a comprehensive strategic plan mined down to logical daily action as well as short-term and long-term goals.

Democratic principles and practices will not only complement leadership styles, but also empower members of an organization to achieve success at levels that would seem impossible to those who try to control people through autocratic means. They also facilitate leadership at all levels of the organizational structure and help sustain change initiatives beyond short-term wins [19].

6. CONCLUSIONS

Effective leaders may follow the AIM model discussed in this paper to realize solutions to their organizational problems. After thorough reflection and self-assessment, the leader should arrive at an understanding of their predominant leadership style and corresponding behaviors. The leader should then assess their organization and determine other leadership behaviors, based on situational factors, and combine them to form a comprehensive personalized leadership strategy. Once the leader has formed this strategy, they should integrate the tenets of change, as defined by Kotter [15], into their plan of action. Democratic principles and practices [18] should likewise be embedded throughout the strategy and assimilated into a comprehensive organizational improvement plan focused on the successful implementation of a research-proven solution of a significant problem.

The challenge facing leaders is that in most cases they know the problems facing their organization and the corresponding solutions. These problems and solutions represent the 'What' needs to be done to improve. But while leaders know what needs to be done, all too often, they do not know 'How' to get it done [20]. The use of AIM represents the 'how' part of the

problem-solving process needed to bridge the gap from problems to corresponding solutions (see Figure 2).
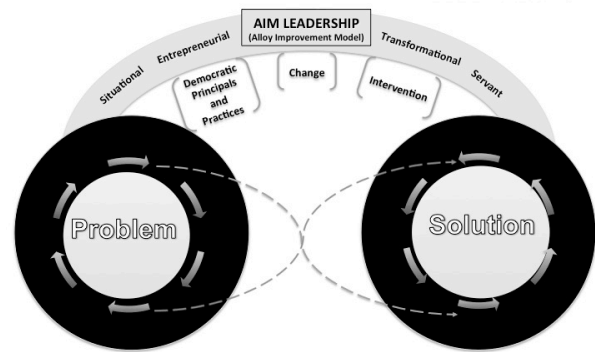

Figure 2. AIM Problem-Solving Process

The integration and delivery of AIM concepts is not easy. It takes many years of preparation, scholarly activity, and application. But the effort is worth the reward as with dedication and practice, the effective leader is able to solve organizational problems with confidence in a seamless, effective manner [21].

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