Effects of Three Principal Styles on School Improvement

Initiators are more successful than Managers or Responders in facilitating change.

Gene Hall, William L. Rutherford, Shirley M. Hord, Leslie L. Huling

The need for more and better information about the leadership role of principals in school improvement efforts sparked the research now under way at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education at the University of Texas.

One of the objectives of this research has been to identify the specific kinds and combinations of behaviors that principals can and should exhibit on a day-to-day basis to bring about improvement in schools. Our research group wanted more than vague concepts of leadership or lists of global variables and strategies that all principals should use. If the role of the principal is critical, then it should be possible to identify and relate principals' daily interventions to what happens in classrooms when teachers attempt to implement new practices.

To date a series of three studies have been conducted to explore and describe the way principals work. One key to the success of these studies has been limiting the scope of the studies to the role of the principal as change facilitator. Our staff had concluded that in addition to definitional problems, one of the likely reasons for the absence of significant findings in so many previous studies of principals was the tendency to study all parts of the principals' work simultaneously. The staff also realized the importance of obtaining firsthand documentation of the daily behaviors of principals, rather than conducting an after the fact debriefing or surveying teachers for their perceptions of what principals did.

Another factor in the success of these studies came from an obvious finding of the first study (Hall, Hord, and Griffin, 1980)—all principals are not the same. Principals view their role and priorities differently and operationally define their roles differently in terms of what they actually do each day. This perspective of the principalship suggested that in studies of principal effects, normative sampling would not work. Principals should be systematically selected as different in terms of some independent variable, such as change facilitator style. By studying sets of principals who worked in different ways it should be easier to identify systematic effects and to compare differences.

The Concept of Change Facilitator Style

The idea of leaders having a style is not new. However, when various bodies of literature were examined—particularly research on industrial organizational leadership, change process and educational administration—it became clear that there was no operational definition of style. Further, and more troubling, a careful distinction had not been drawn, either conceptually or methodologically, between leader behaviors and leader style (Rutherford, Hord, Huling, and Hall, 1983). The concepts were used interchangeably and often the measures appeared to have little relationship to...
the variables being described in the study hypotheses.

The shortsightedness of many studies in their treatment of style is suggested by McCall and Lombardo (1978) who point out that, "leadership researchers may see delegation activity as a leadership style and correlate it with group productivity, while, in many cases, delegation is a political tool used by leaders to create a desirable situation" (p. 158). Not only does a particular behavior not represent an overall style, but one cannot accurately describe or understand the behavior without understanding the motivation behind it. The importance of motivation in understanding style has been emphasized by others including Fiedler (1978) and Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958). Fiedler contends that effective group interaction is dependent on "... leader personality attributes, reflecting his or her motivational structure..." (p. 60) and the situational control and influence of the leader. Tannenbaum and Schmidt maintain that a manager must consider forces or motivations when deciding how to manage, and one of these they term "forces operating within his own personality" (p. 98). In contrast, others (Jago and Vroom, 1972; Hill and Hughes, 1974) seem to view style as a set of behaviors without reference to motivation. With this background for the RDCTE studies change facilitator style was defined in terms of a combination of principals' behaviors, concerns, and knowledge, and the tone of their actions.

Besides being plagued by definitional and conceptual difficulties, the idea of style has another serious problem. Invariably research on leadership style has begun with an identification and description of a style or element of a style. Leaders were then observed or subordinates and leaders questioned to see if the leader might or did exhibit the described style in different situations. To further complicate things, in many of these studies followers were asked about individual behaviors of leaders rather than being surveyed about a gestalt of the leaders behaviors and motivations. This more multivariate approach to defining leadership has emerged recently in several research studies (Thomas, 1978; Hall, Rutherford, and Griffin, 1982) and a literature review (Leithwood and Montgomery, 1982).

**The Principal as Director, Administrator, or Facilitator**

In Thomas' (1978) study of more than 60 schools, the focus was on the role of school principals in managing diverse educational programs. Out of this study she identified three patterns or classifications of principal behavior related to the facilitation of alternative programs: Director, Administrator, and Facilitator.

Principals who were Directors maintained an active interest in all aspects of the school from curriculum and teaching to budgeting and scheduling. They also retained final decision-making authority in the school although teachers contributed to decisions affecting the classroom. Administrators made decisions in areas affecting the school as a whole, leaving teachers with much autonomy in their own classroom. These principals tended to identify with district management rather than with their own faculties. Facilitators on the other hand, thought of themselves as colleagues of the faculty. They perceived their primary role to be supporting and assisting teachers in their work. One way they did this was to involve teachers in the decision-making process.

Thomas concluded that although many factors affected implementation, the leadership of the principal appeared to be one of the most important factors in the success or demise of an alternative program. Schools under the leadership of a Directive or Facilitative principal had a greater degree of implementation of alternative programs than did schools headed by an Administrative principal. Furthermore, in those schools that had a single alternative program (versus multi-building programs), when strong leadership was lacking program offerings tended to drift toward something different from that originally intended and teachers within the program tended to follow disparate classroom practices. However, Directive principals had more difficulty managing multi-building alternative programs than did Administrators and Facilitators.

**The Principal as Initiator, Manager, or Responder**

Working independently of Thomas, researchers at RDCTE (Hall, Rutherford, and Griffin, 1982) identified three change facilitator styles that are very similar to Thomas' styles. As a result of this research, we now have operational descriptions of the three styles, which we call Initiator, Manager, and Responder.

Initiators have clear, decisive long-range policies and goals that transcend but include implementation of current innovations. They tend to have very strong beliefs about what good schools and teaching should be like and work intensely to attain this vision. Decisions are made in relation to their goals for the school and in terms of what they believe to be best for students, which is based on current knowledge of classroom practice. Initiators have strong expectations for students, teachers, and themselves. They convey and monitor these expectations through frequent contacts with teachers and clear explanation of how the school is to operate and how teachers are to teach. When they feel it is in the best interest of their school, particularly the students, Initiators will seek changes in district programs or policies or they will reinterpret them to suit the needs of the school. Initiators are adamant but not unkind; they solicit input from staff and then make decisions in terms of school goals.

Managers represent a broader range of behaviors. They demonstrate both
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Responsive behaviors in answer to situations or people and they also initiate actions in support of the change effort. The variations in their behavior seem to be linked to their rapport with teachers and central office staff as well as how well they understand and buy into a particular change effort. Managers work without fanfare to provide basic support to facilitate teachers' use of an innovation. They keep teachers informed about decisions and are sensitive to teacher needs. They will defend their teachers from what are perceived as excessive demands. When they learn that the central office wants something to happen in their school they then become very involved with their teachers in making it happen. Yet, they do not typically initiate attempts to move beyond the basics of what is imposed.

Responders place heavy emphasis on allowing teachers and others the opportunity to take the lead. They believe their primary role is to maintain a smooth running school by focusing on traditional administrative tasks, keeping teachers content and treating students well. They view teachers as strong professionals who are able to carry out instruction with little guidance. Responders emphasize the personal side of their relationships with teachers and others. Before they make decisions they often give everyone an opportunity to have input so as to weigh their feelings or to allow others to make the decision. A related characteristic is the tendency toward making decisions in terms of immediate circumstances rather than in terms of longer range instructional or school goals. This seems to be due in part to their desire to please others and in part to their more limited vision of how their school and staff should change in the future.

Leadership Styles Verified
These descriptions were derived from earlier descriptive studies of principals and refined in the more recent comparative studies. The first study was the secondary analyses of data (Hall, Rutherford, and Griffin, 1982) from a study of the implementation of a curriculum innovation in one large school district (Loucks and Pratt, 1979). The data from nine elementary schools out of a larger sample were randomized to gain an understanding of the implementation process in these schools.

Out of this analysis the hypothesis emerged that implementation success varied in the schools because of the concerns and behaviors of the principals. Since all the study schools were similar in context, implemented the same curriculum, and received the same amount and kinds of support, this seemed to be the only direct explanation for why implementation had varied. Interestingly, the schools sorted into three groups in terms of implementation at the classroom level, and the principals appeared to group in the same way in terms of their "style." Thus, the three change facilitator styles were initially sketched out.

A second study was a three-month pilot involving ten elementary schools in different communities each implementing different curriculum innovations (Rutherford, 1981; Horn, 1981). In this study the primary objective was to develop procedures for documenting the day-to-day intervention behaviors of principals. Again, the principals appeared to be representative of the same particular styles.

The existence of principal types or styles has since then been reinforced in a carefully designed literature review by Leithwood and Montgomery (1982), who characterize principals as "effective" and "typical." In their review of 29 studies, the authors used a framework for planned change to investigate existing knowledge about principal behaviors as they relate to effectiveness. One aspect of the review considered the role of the principal in general while two other strands attended to research on school change and innovation implementation, and school effectiveness.

Leithwood and Montgomery found that effective principals were pro-active, particularly in regard to instruction and the welfare of students. On the other hand they found that "Rather than being pro-active as the effective principal appeared to be, the typical principal tended to be primarily responsive—responsive to district demands and the demands from the many other sources of problems encountered everyday" (p. 27).

The types of styles found in these research and review efforts appear to have similarities. The Director, Initiator, and Effective Principals would seem to have like characteristics. The Administrator andResponder seem to have some similar characteristics, while the Facilitator and Manager are alike in many ways. Leithwood and Montgomery's Typical principal appears to span both of the latter groupings. Support for the Initiator principal is also found in the effective schools study by Edmonds (1979) and Venzeky and Winfield (1979). A logical next step would be to closely examine the day-to-day behaviors of principals using each of these change facilitating styles and to describe any effects. This was the objective of the third RDCTE study.
Refined Definitions of the Three Change Facilitator Styles

An important key to analyzing change facilitator style is identifying behaviors that are indicators of a particular style. Out of the morass of daily activities a system was needed for identifying and summarizing those behaviors that were considered to be representative of a particular change facilitator style. As a first step the array of data and findings from the three studies were used to develop the refined paragraph definitions of the Responder, Manager, and Initiator presented above. These descriptions represent a summary of the qualitative and quantitative data that have been collected and analyzed across all three studies of elementary school principals (N = 29). However, the paragraph definitions could not include all of the detail and richness of the full data set; they only represented brief summaries for grasping the gestalt of each style.

In order to more easily summarize the different aspects of the concerns, motivation, tone and behaviors of the three change facilitator styles, we developed a set of descriptive dimensions. We first identified an array of behaviors or indicators to contrast the styles. For each set of indicators we wrote a brief phrase describing the normative approach that appeared to be typical of each style. We then clustered the indicators around larger dimensions or competency areas that are similar to those frequently described in the literature and among practitioners. The resultant summary, included as Figure 1, provides a framework for relating individual behaviors to overall style. With this framework, it is then possible to explore many of the issues and implications of the principal’s role in school improvement.

Some Implications of Principal’s Change Facilitator Style

Considering particular aspects of the principal’s role, such as change facilitator style, has turned out to be surprisingly productive. By focusing on the principals’ change facilitator style, we have learned much about key behaviors and the different ways principals can facilitate school improvement. The work has also helped clarify some of the distinctions that practitioners, researchers, and policy makers have been struggling with. Some of the findings and

![Figure 1. Indicators of Change Facilitator Style.](image-url)
related issues are particularly germane to the present wide reaching examination of principals and school effectiveness. Five of these issues are briefly discussed here.

What other styles are there? The styles described in Figure 1 represent three that were the subject of descriptive and quantitative studies. Other styles can be imagined and some defy categorization. Some of the more likely styles include the *despot*, who unlike the initiator, listens to no one and just decrees change. Various forms of resisters can also be imagined such as the *covert saboteur* and the *guerilla*. The opportunity for identifying and studying these styles is left to those researchers who have an interest in studying school improvement failures.

What is the relationship between change facilitator style and implementation success? In the most recent study of principals, change facilitator style data were collected about implementation of new curriculum programs (Huling, Hall, Hord, and Rutherford, 1983). Established procedures were used to periodically assess teachers' stages of concern about the innovation (Hall and Rutherford, 1976), their level of use of the innovation (Hall and Loucks, 1977), and the innovation configuration (Hall and Loucks, 1981) that each teacher used. The day-to-day innovation related intervention behaviors of the principals were documented and overall change facilitator styles rated. In this study all teachers in all schools implemented the new curriculum, which would suggest that at least in this case all three styles were “effective.” However, there were different degrees of implementation in terms of concerns, use, and innovation configurations. The overall correlation between implementation success at the classroom level and principal change facilitator style was .74. This suggests, that although implementation was accomplished in all study schools, there was more quality and quantity in schools with Initiator style principals than in schools with principals using the Manager and Responder styles.

How does the climate compare across schools with principals using different change facilitator styles? Due to the tremendous cooperation and assistance provided by principals and teachers in the study schools and the pioneering work done by James and Jones (1974), it...
was possible to assess psychological climate as part of the most recent study. The results are provocative: teachers perceive a more positive climate in schools with principals using the Manager style! Teachers in schools with principals using the Initiator style are somewhat less positive, and teachers in schools with principals using the Responder style are much less positive in their perceptions of the climate.

In hindsight, these findings make sense although they also raise a new dilemma. The most straightforward interpretation is that Manager style principals protect their teachers and strive to keep everything running smoothly. Thus teachers are more satisfied. Initiator style principals listen to their teachers but have high expectations and keep pushing. The constant pressure is not as well liked. Principals using the Responder style are most concerned about teachers' feelings and perceptions but tend to respond to them one at a time without coordinated or consistent communication and priorities. Thus teachers feel more job ambiguity and less control.

Can principals change their change facilitator style? This is a constantly asked question. Unfortunately, for the impatient, the available research and training experiences lead us to believe that one's style is so closely tied to personality and history that it is not easily changed. Individual behaviors can be changed, at least for a time, but the overall change facilitator style continues. Further, there is little likelihood that decrees, mandates, and two-day workshops will result in a major metamorphosis of style. With training, ongoing concerns-based coaching and support all of us can improve. This is an area where there clearly needs to be more research and careful evaluation of training programs.

What can be done for less effective change facilitators? If the findings from replications of the studies described here are consistent, then there will be a research base of identified facilitating behaviors that more effective principals use. None of the individual behaviors are that difficult to use. Thus it should be possible to develop training programs to assist principals and other change facilitators in becoming sensitive to the critical importance of these behaviors and in using them with greater ease. By
referring to the indicators listed in Figure 1 it is also possible to observe persons who aspire to be more effective in their change facilitator roles and to develop procedures for identifying those who have more potential. Some recent exploratory work in industry, where these findings have been used to select managers, indicate that something as simple as specially designed interview procedures can be helpful in identifying candidates who appear to already have mastered indicated behaviors. Of course, all of these possibilities must take into account which criteria of effectiveness are being emphasized.

In Summary

Much more research must be done before the total functioning of the principal as effective change facilitator can be described and understood. Also, the criteria of effectiveness that is used to make judgments must be considered most carefully. For example, if all teachers using a new program had been the criteria, then all three styles of principals were observed to be "effective." If implementation success were the criteria, then the Initiator style principal was most effective. However, if teachers' positive perceptions of their climate is considered important, then the Manager style principal seemed to be more effective. To make things even more complicated, none of these criteria directly address student achievement, which might require a different principal style for greatest effectiveness. The picture is rich enough to allow for many styles and combinations of people. The key appears to be in the blending, matching, and sequencing, rather than striving to maintain a particular snapshot.

The shared goal for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers is to identify programs and processes that contribute to increased school and teacher effectiveness. The studies described here demonstrate some ways that some principals made a difference. However, as with children and teachers, all principals are not the same and for each gain there is the risk of a loss somewhere else. The role of the principal in the school improvement process must be viewed in terms of the many factors that affect it rather than naively assuming that a quick cure can be made simply by changing one variable, such as the...
change facilitator style of the principal. School life is much richer and more complex than that. This is why our schools work as well as they do, why intelligent and sensitive school improvement is a very real possibility, and why simplistic ultimate solutions regularly fail.

References


