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Catholic School Educators as Adaptive Leaders: A Structure for Prophetic Action in Response to COVID-19

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This article shares the perspectives of Catholic educational practitioners in the United States as they responded to the challenges of COVID-19. The article then turns to the challenges for practitioners ahead and suggests a prophetic response utilizing the adaptive leadership framework. It outlines some of the issues and questions that must be addressed for the Fall semester. It concludes with references to scripture, Pope Francis, and others regarding a prophetic response to COVID-19 as a tempestuous sea.

Keywords

COVID-19, Adaptive leadership, prophetic leadership, Pope Francis

The last few months have required an historic shift in the way we deliver Catholic education in the United States and by all accounts we have responded impeccably! However, as the school year ends, battle weary educators must face a multitude of decisions without easy answers regarding the Fall. Adaptive leadership, a leadership approach developed by Heifetz (1994), provides a useful framework for addressing these issues that are confronted in such unsettling times. Finally, we must persevere in our faith and live it by reaching out to one another in unprecedented ways during this time of crisis and beyond.

A Change Over These Last Few Months

As I shifted from our in-person masters' and doctoral cohorts to Zoom delivery, rather than beginning each class with a prayer (which came later), I began with a check-in. The master's degree cohort check-in on March 21, 2020 lasted about 30 minutes; people were feeling the stress, the uncertainty, but also the resolve of membership on a team of committed colleagues with an esprit de corps unmatched by even the United States Marines. They were navigating the uncertainty of turning on a dime from a personalized education in their tight-knit Catholic schools, to synchronous, hybrid, and asyn-

chronous learning arrangements. They were fearful but energized by their deft handling of the transition in such unsettled times. They shared successes and reveled in a demonstration of their resilience as they reopened immediately after Spring break while many of their public school counterparts remained closed: “The support has been unbelievable,” “I’m impressed with how we’ve responded,” “Pastors are saying how awesome we are.”

The doctoral cohort check-in prior to prayer on March 28th and April 25th lasted nearly 50 minutes even though it included fewer students; These were also deeply committed Catholic school educators and administrators who generally held higher positions: a pastor, principals, and superintendents of dioceses and archdioceses. They were navigating the uncertainty, leading the transitions, but the fear was palpable: school closures, furloughs, and the human suffering of it all. As we closed out the classes in May, it was clear that the adrenaline rush that fueled the quick learning, the instantaneous decision-making amidst the constant flood of new and critically important information was wearing off. There was still an unwavering commitment to the mission, and the unparalleled esprit de corps that marks our Catholic school educators at all levels, but the stress was taking its toll: “We have to guess what it will look like, and the rules keep changing;” “My mind turns off at 2 a.m. because I’m exhausted;” “We have four meetings about closures looming;” “What I’ve seen is pockets of greatness and real cracks in the system;” “Everyone is on edge...the teacher calls are through the roof.”

Our Prophetic Response

What is to be our response as Catholic educators to COVID-19? We are called by our baptism to be prophets, not messiahs. While a messiah is thought of as a deliverer or savior, a prophet is “an effective or leading spokesperson of a cause” or “one gifted with more than ordinary spiritual and moral insight” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Our messiah lived and died 2000 years ago, and he lives on in us today as we serve as prophets for his Church and schools. What is necessary today is prophetic action; and to cast ourselves in the role of messiah and expect a messianic performance from ourselves or others is idolatry. Parker Palmer (1998) called it “functional atheism – the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me,” which he recognized as a shadow side of leadership rather than the light that ought to be projected (p 205).

Prophetic action presupposes a certain degree of well-being: One must be attentive to one’s own present spiritual, mental, and emotional health in order

to be in a position to help others. Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray (Luke 5:16), and Pope Francis has invited all of us “...all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (Francis, 2013, no. 3). I find solace in the daily readings of the Mass, and an evening Examen (a reflective exercise championed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola to maintain performance as contemplatives in action) that has practical as well as spiritual benefits.

It also might be necessary to get away from the events of the last few months for a brief but important break before tackling the issues that we face this Summer and next Fall. The strict instructions delivered on an airplane regarding the drop-down masks in the event of an emergency dictate that one put on your mask first and THEN assist your children. This is sound advice for the current situation. Finish the year strong, but before turning to the myriad issues before us—including those of our faculty, staff, students, and families—find a brief respite from the frenetic pace.

Adaptive Leadership

Prophetic action also requires attentiveness to the adaptive challenges all around us. Heifetz (1994) published the seminal book on adaptive leadership, an approach that “...has occupied a unique place in the leadership literature” (Northouse, 2016, p. 257). Rather than casting the leader as a messiah who solves problems for people, the leader is cast in the role of one who mobilizes, motivates, organizes, orients, and focuses the attention of others (Heifetz, 1994). This is analogous to the tone taken by Pope Francis (2013) when he wrote:

I have sought advice from a number of people and I intend to express my own concerns about this particular chapter of the Church’s work of evangelization. Countless issues involving evangelization today might be discussed here, but I have chosen not to explore these many questions which call for further reflection and study. Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’. (no. 16)

Adaptive leadership “...focuses primarily on how leaders help others do the work they need to do, in order to adapt to the challenges they face” (Northouse, 2016, p. 258). The adaptive leadership model requires a differentiation between problems of a more technical nature (clearly defined problems with known solutions that can be implemented with existing organizational behavior), adaptive challenges (ill-defined problems that cannot be solved by either the leader’s authority and expertise or through existing organizational behavior), and those that have both a technical and adaptive dimension. The more adaptive the challenge, the more the leader must leverage others to define the problems in the challenging situations and implement solutions. The five important leadership behaviors are: (a) get on the balcony; (b) think politically; (c) orchestrate the conflict; (d) give the work back; and (e) hold steady (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

So what does all this mean for Catholic schools in our present challenge? Getting on the balcony is a metaphor for getting above the fray to get a better perspective on what is going on. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) identify four diagnostic tasks that are important: (a) distinguish technical from adaptive challenges (discussed above), (b) find out where people are (What are students, parents, faculty, and staff saying?), (c) listen to the songs beneath the words (What are the values and feelings behind the words expressed: fear?, fatigue?, eagerness to get started?), (d) read the behavior of authority figures for clues (What is the Centers for Disease Control saying? What about federal, state, county, municipal, and diocesan authorities?). It is important to read behind their words too: “The senior authority will reflect what you are stirring up in the community...In fact, that person is trying to manage all the various factions, and what you observe is a response to the pressures he or she is experiencing” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. 68). Reich (2020) suggests that schools

...recruit a few teachers who have gotten the hang of remote learning, and find a few students and parents who are excited to imagine a new summer and fall. Read about schools in Asia and Europe that are further along the course of the pandemic. Start designing for concrete moments. Tell stories about what the first day of school could look like. Draft new schedules for what could be done with stimulus funds for extended-learning days. Write out the plans for when a COVID-19 flare-up is detected and you have only a day or two to prepare again

for remote learning. Revisit the academic and cultural priorities of your community and consider how you can stay focused on the most important work of schooling in the midst of ongoing disruption. (para.10)

Thinking politically is something critically important to effective leadership, but is not often discussed. It is beyond the scope of this article to adequately address issues of power in organizations, but Bolman and Deal (2018) provide a handy reference for this. One must find partners (including oppositional voices) to deal with the issues: they provide protection, generally assist in making better decisions, and strengthen the credibility of the decisions made. One must also begin with one's own responsibility in the current context, model the behaviors one wishes to instill, and acknowledge the loss that comes from navigating issues of safety and getting back to some semblance of normalcy. One must also recognize that some people will not like the decisions that are made and will be harmed by these decisions in one way or another. There are several adaptive challenges raised by COVID-19 that may require a number of task forces to address, not the least of which are the structural changes that will be necessary in the Fall. Scafidi and Wearne (2020) identify issues of student and staff safety, issues of fiscal solvency including enrollment management, and issues related to your educational value proposition given the novel forms of educational delivery (including the assumption that students may spend a significant amount of time at home).

The safety of students and faculty in high-risk categories must be paramount in all decisions. Although written for higher education, an article by Maloney and Kim (2020) identifies 15 different options for restarting in the Fall that might stimulate out-of-the-box thinking for PK-12 Catholic schools. A concept gaining a great deal of traction is a weekly hyflex option (weekly hybrid with flexible attendance) that involves a once-a-week in-person option (First year students on Mondays, second year students on Tuesdays...special groups and clubs on Fridays) that allows for social-distancing throughout a school building with a reduced number of students and allows for a segmented shut down of those individuals impacted in the case of an outbreak. Students may attend this once-a-week class in person or Zoom in from home with parental permission. Such a move also accelerates faculty movement towards a flipped classroom and project-based learning less dependent upon direct instruction.

Orchestrating the conflict recognizes that there will be conflict (palpable or latent) in any change, and that change both creates harm and fuels progress. It is important to remember that whether the change represents a first order change (a change that fits with one's existing paradigms) or a second order change (lies outside one's existing paradigms) will be idiosyncratic to the individual (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). A holding environment, a useful tool for orchestrating conflict, is the space created to contain and adjust the heat generated by addressing difficult issues where conflicts and competing passions can quickly boil over (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The computer science teacher, the science laboratory course teacher, and the theology teacher might have vastly different ideas about the importance of having students physically present for learning in the Fall, as might the lower-primary grade teachers and the middle-school grade teachers. Teachers and parents may have widely divergent attitudes towards the various possible approaches such as the weekly hyflex option cited above. No novice at orchestrating conflict, Pope Francis has observed that, "Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met." (Pope Francis, 2013, no. 7).

The leader's role is to control the temperature within the holding environment by alternatively raising the temperature (drawing attention to tough questions, bringing conflicts to the surface, etc.) and lowering the temperature (speaking to people's anger, fear, and disorientation; slow down the process; reconnect people to their shared values, etc.). It is critical to set the pace (decisions can't be put off forever) and to promote a vision of the new reality that is neither the same as it was before, but also not necessarily horrible... maybe even positive in some regards if it moves us towards widespread use of instructional innovations such as the flipped classroom and project-based learning.

Giving back the work recognizes again that we are all called to be prophets not messiahs. Larson and LaFasto (1989) have demonstrated that involvement enhances commitment, and that productive involvement involves two components: (a) the leader being crystal clear about the goal (and the consequences of achieving or not achieving the goal); and (b) actively engaging team members in planning strategies for achieving the goal. Giving back the work recognizes that the work belongs to the people who will do it, and that they need to own and solve the problems associated with performance in the new reality. Heifetz & Linsky (2017) warn that leadership interventions ought to be short and simple: providing observations ("I hear you saying..."),

questions (“Was there something said that you find disturbing?”), interpretations (“I don’t think the conflict is really about X, but may be about Y”), and occasionally taking action (“You are not addressing the key issue here. Let’s work the problem”). Fundamentally, what we are after here is both a change of heart and a change in behavior towards this new reality that we all must embrace!

Holding steady involves “maintaining your poise so that you can plan the next step” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. 141). People are going to get angry; You will need to take the heat and not get drawn into the proximate unfolding drama. Holding steady also involves focusing attention on the issue, but also allowing other issues to ripen.

Issues of safety will require consideration of certain prophylactic measures (Should we require wearing masks?, Should we purchase two masks for everyone? Should we allow for 10 minute passing periods and insist on a structured hand-washing regimen between each class?).

Issues of instructional delivery may require consideration of professional development and instructional design adjustments (Do we need additional training in Zoom for our teachers? Do we need more professional development on distance learning based upon parental, student, and faculty feedback from this last Spring? What have we learned as faculty from our time this last Spring regarding what we would do differently in the Fall?).

Issues of COVID-19 flare-ups may require consideration of a novel crisis response (If we start school with students in smaller groupings and on different days, taking their temperature and recording it upon entry, and we provide for movement management utilizing social distancing, small cohorts of students, and cohort movement: What do we do when we discover that a student was asymptomatic COVID-19 positive while they were at school yesterday? What contact tracing provisions ought we have in place? Can we continue school with those NOT in that student’s cohort movement group?

Issues of pastoral care that may require special considerations (How do we address the needs of immunosuppressed students? How do we address the needs of immunosuppressed or older faculty? What do we do about parents who want the education, but are concerned about sending their children back to school? What are the difficulties with moving to this new system? What do we do to ameliorate difficulties of individual students or families? What do we do if students or families encounter social, emotional, psychological, or financial difficulties?). However, some issues or decisions may not yet be ripe because there is not yet widespread urgency to have made a decision. Four

questions are central in determining ripeness: “What other concerns occupy the people who need to be engaged? How deeply are people affected by the problem? How much do people need to learn? And what are the senior authority figures saying about the issue?” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. 148) In the case of COVID-19, it might be that the necessary and controlling guidance from federal, state, local, or diocesan officials has not yet been given.

Adaptive Leadership in a Tempestuous Storm

Adaptive leadership focused “...primarily on how leaders help others do the work they need to do, in order to adapt to the challenges they face” (Northouse, 2016, p. 258) is an apt description of the series of events that transpired in the Gospel of Matthew and continues today. After building the capacity of his disciples, Jesus created a structure for their continued work (see Matthew 16:18-19), explained what was going to happen to him (Matthew 16:21), and “gave back the work” even against Peter’s protestations (Matthew 16:22-26). The Gospel culminates in the final mandate (Matthew 28:19-20) that included the admonishment to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, ...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” This last instruction given by Jesus, the teacher, while he stood on this earth, is the same apostolic mission that we participate in today.

It is easy to get lost in the challenges of COVID-19 and succumb to hopelessness. I am reminded of the *Urbi et Orbi* address of Pope Francis on March 27th in which he called to mind the events of Mark 4:35-41 and all the terror in the voices of the apostles: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” He observed that,

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. (Francis, 2020, para 4)

To be Church is to know that one is not alone or abandoned, even when it might feel like that indeed is the case.

The metaphor of a tempestuous storm was picked up a month later by Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan, who drew on an observation of Damian Barr regarding the current pandemic: “We are not all in the same boat. We are in the same storm...some are in yachts...and some have just the one oar” (Noonan, 2020). Noonan (2020) observed that

some will sail through, health and profession intact, some will lose one or both. Some of us get to feel we’re part of a substantial crew. Some of us feel we’re rowing alone. We can move forward through this crisis experiencing our country as an embittered navy waiting to fight it out on shore. Or, alternatively, as a big crazy armada with millions of people throwing and catching millions of lifelines...What effort, patience and creativity it will take to reach safe haven. How much easier it will be if we see ourselves not as separate ships but members of the most brilliant, raucous and varied armada. (para. 2)

As members of this most brilliant raucous and varied armada that is Catholic education, we must draw on every ounce of patience and creativity to reach safe haven, all the while throwing and catching millions of lifelines to others tossed about in the storm. Is this image not also a metaphor of the “missionary option” called for by Pope Francis (2020)

...that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. (no. 27)

While out on the balcony, one ought to look beyond the safety of one’s own ship, to the safety of others in this tempestuous sea that might only have one oar. We must persevere in our faith and live it by reaching out to one another in unprecedented ways during this time of crisis and beyond. “It is a time to get our lives back on track with regards to you, Lord, and to others... Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons” (Pope Francis, 2020, para. 7). These are the skills required of adaptive leaders.

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