Sustaining leadership capability via media technologies: towards a social network perspective[1]

Preservar a capacidade de liderança através de tecnologias de mídia: rumo à perspectiva de rede social

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Resumo: Este estudo buscou examinar a efetividade do emprego das tecnologias de redes sociais *on-line* para promover e sustentar a supervisão colaborativa de capacitação em liderança de novatos e jovens diretores. Elaborada na perspectiva das redes sociais, a presente pesquisa propõe que as metodologias de treinamento colaborativo, juntamente com tecnologias de mídias sociais, podem melhorar as habilidades de liderança dos diretores. As evidências preliminares detectadas no trabalho demonstraram relação positiva entre a capacidade de liderança e o uso de tecnologias de mídia social colaborativa como meio de *coaching*. Os resultados encontrados mostram que os diretores acharam útil compartilhar suas dificuldades e seus conhecimentos de liderança, além de experiências bem-sucedidas, através de uma comunidade virtual. Por outro lado, a comunidade virtual é eficiente em custo e tempo, e eficaz ao chegar a diversos indivíduos para a transferência de conhecimentos e experiências. As implicações teóricas e práticas também são discutidas.

Palavras-chave: tecnologia de mídias sociais, liderança, *coaching,* diretores.

Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of using online social media technologies to advance and sustain collaborative coaching for novice and incumbent principals' leadership capability. Drawing from social network perspective, we propose that collaborative coaching methodologies coupled with social media technologies can enhance leadership skills for principals. Our preliminary evidence demonstrated positive relationship between principals' leadership capability advancement and usage of social media technologies as collaborative coaching medium. Our results show that principals found it useful to share their difficulties and successful leadership knowledge and experiences via virtual community. Further, virtual community is efficient in cost and time and effective in reaching out to diverse individuals for knowledge and experience transfer. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: social media technology, advancing leadership, blended coaching, novice principals.

INTRODUCTION

Blended coaching strategies (Bloom, 2005) utilize facilitative coaching, instructional coaching, collaborative coaching, transformational coaching and coaching for system change. They are effective strategies for building and developing new leaders and advancing skills for existing leaders in organizations. However, it is not clear if these strategies can be implemented in the virtual space and still be effective. In other words, in the era of technological advancement, it is important to examine if leadership capability can be built, developed and sustained via media technologies. To be a good leader in any organization is not an easy job. It takes time and practice to build up leading experiences in a school environment. To connect with other school leaders and seek support during hard times or difficulties helps novice principals gain precious leadership experience. Forming a leadership network among principals and head-teachers encourages collaborative support and deeper communication with one another.

Drawing from social network theory (Burt, 1992, Han, 2006), we extend the weak ties perspective that an organization can leverage network and ties that are weak, meaning not frequently communicated to achieve maximum benefits (Granovetter, 1973). Prior empirical research has found weak ties to have positive impact on the performance of technology-based new ventures (Han and McKelvey, 2008) and entrepreneurs overcome liability of newness by leveraging capability of larger firms to build firm's own specific capability (Han, 2008). We extend this view to examine if weak ties in the virtual community can help leaders in leveraging and transferring knowledge and capability. We examine the effectiveness of applying social media technologies to enrich the leadership capability in communication, collaboration and advancement by looking at experienced and novice kindergarten principals in Hong Kong.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

New policies and new changes in early childhood education in Hong Kong in the past five years, now require early childhood teachers to attain diploma level and early childhood school principals to attain degree level academic qualifications. Starting 2009, all new kindergarten principals are required to attain a bachelor degree and complete a principalship training course before they can be registered as a new principal. Therefore, if a senior principal retires from a school, the school organization needs to hire a new 'qualified' principal to replace the leadership position. In this situation, there are many more young new principals working in early childhood organizations in recent years with higher academic qualification (bachelor degree), but insufficient leadership experience.

Another new policy related to early childhood education in Hong Kong was introduced in 2007; the Hong Kong government offers education vouchers to parents in order to subsidize tuition fee for young children age from 3 to 6. Preschool organizations which apply the education voucher must be non-profit making early childhood organizations. However, the government also requires those early childhood organizations who are receiving education vouchers from the government to reach certain levels of good school quality. Due to this newly introduced higher requirement from the government, early childhood education organizations tend to recruit qualified teachers and administrators with higher academic background even though some of them have less leadership experience. As a result, many kindergarten teachers or head teachers who attain high academic qualification may be hired to take up the headship and principalship role in early childhood organizations, regardless their insufficient teaching experience or lack of managerial experience.

In recent years, many kindergarten teachers with higher academic background may have less teaching experience. Additionally, some new principals are very young, and have graduated from a pre-service certificate course several years ago, and are continuing with their part time studies in order to attain a bachelor degree. Many of them work as head teachers or principals after they graduate from an education degree program. In this study, we would like to investigate online

leadership training and enhancement approach for novice principals by using social media technologies. The training model may provide further leadership support in the first several years of their principalship or headship.

Social media and emerging technologies are gaining increased attention for use in education. The list of tools grows fast. Examples: blogs, wikis, Ning, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, cloud computing, surface computing, mobile learning, and so on. Social media technologies is a kind of networking system on internet providing a convenient, efficient, boundless, quick response and fast communication method for novice principals to share their concerns, experiences and difficulties. In this study, the collaborative coaching coupled with social media technologies enhancing leadership capacity for principals is investigated.

Rodd (2006) stresses that building leadership capacity in early childhood education is vital for implementing change. Leadership development is as important as teacher development. Extant research supports the notion of the importance of leadership development especially in the early stage of principalship (Bloom, 2005; Hayes, 2004; Rodd, 2006). Bloom (2005), author of a book entitled "Blended coaching: skills and strategies to support principal development", suggests to apply various strategies in preparing school principals, such as facilitative coaching, instructional coaching, collaborative coaching, transformational coaching and coaching for system change. In this study, we apply these blended coaching strategies with social media technologies to facilitate novice principals to meet their challenges, build their social network and prepare them for their changing leadership roles.

In the information age, the development of digital-based social networking system such as Facebook, Twitter, MSN, Xanga offer great opportunity for any group of people to communicate and share their common concerns and provide collaborative social support. Using technologies in the education field is wildly supported by educators and researchers these days. Applying web technology to build relationship and collaborative works may have significance in leadership development.

Thus, we propose the following:

P1: Communication and knowledge transfer over the virtual community is positively related to leadership capability advancement.

P2: Frequency of use of media technologies is negatively related to age of leadership but positively related to their leadership capability advancement.

RESEARCH METHOD

Convenient sampling is used to select novice principals. The selection is from the students who graduated from the Hong Kong Institution of Education within recent five years. Six novice kindergarten principals/head teachers will be invited to join this pilot study. They should have less than three years experience in the post of principal/head teacher and be willing to participate in this study.

Mixed-method is adopted in this study. A pre-study survey aims to understand participants' habit and skills in using social networking system on internet, and their concerns of being a new leader in kindergarten. A training workshop and seminar is being provided to participants and other interested early childhood educators in order to strengthen their skills and knowledge about web social networking systems.

After training, a special facebook/twitter/msn/xanga leadership group has been set up for in-depth group communication and sharing. The investigator is the researcher as well as the mentor to empower the participants' leadership skills and their roles. On-going support is provided to novice principals through web gathering, sharing and discussion. Online focus group discussions are also organized from time to time during the six months period of this study. All written information is collected, coded and analyzed for investigation.

During the process, the following activities have been put in force. 1. Online focus group discussion. 2. Video clip consultancy. 3. Leadership journals and articles sharing. 4. Daily/weekly blogging with photos. 5. Workshop and seminar. 6. Pre and post survey. 7. Networking with experienced principals. 8. Weekend/evening Tea gathering. 9. Individual meeting with mentor.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Using social networking system like Facebook to enhance leadership skills for novice kindergarten principals strengthens novice principals in many ways. Since novice principals spend more time in understanding the school culture, different practices of various colleagues, new management routines and get to know people, the use of internet social media technologies saves their precious time in traveling and get the response from the mentor in shorter period. As a novice principal (NP-C) stated, "In my first year of headship, there were tons of challenges in front of me. I found the comments and suggestions from my mentors were useful and helpful. Whenever I have headache with some issues, I post my problems to our Facebook group. They are willing to provide their thoughts, advices or ideas, sometimes the advices work well, sometimes it inspires me to think boarder in different ways. I appreciate very much for their fast responses and good suggestions, very helpful. " (NP-C)

MULTI-FACILITATOR SUPPORT WITHIN THE WHOLE GROUP

The group comprises six novice principals, two experienced principals and one mentor (the researcher).

This way, novice principals can get support from various people, such as the two experienced principals in the early childhood field and the mentor from university. Whenever an issue or concern is posted on Facebook group, all members can view and respond to other members, all participants are free to give their thoughts and comments, including novice principals. Therefore, sharing experience within the whole group raises in-depth discussion on arising issues. Everybody can share their views from different perspectives and various background experiences.

ANONYMOUS TITLE FOR ALL GROUP MEMBERS

For security purposes, when participants use the internet for discussion and sharing, all novice principals and experienced principals adopt a special name or title in Facebook. This protects personal information and school information on the internet. All participants use a brand new email account and a special name, all photos and video clips must set restricted to 'only friends' from our Facebook group. Thus, private school issues, concerns and problem discussion can be protected on internet keeping privacy within the group. All participants can discuss and share freely, openly and honestly within the group.

ONLINE COACHING

For novice principals, it is important to have support whenever needed. Online coaching provides convenient support without pre-appointment and travelling time. All participants are encouraged to spend half to one hour online whenever they have time, either day time, lunch time, after work or before bed time. Participants are encouraged to share their successful or failed experiences on any issue, such as school management, human relationship, resource management, finance management, new policy development and so on.

According to a novice principal, NP-E, she posted her problem with a parent as below:

"A teacher cried and told me that a parent used void language to scold the teacher loudly in front of children and other parents when the parent picked up her son at the end of the school day. The reason for that was the child fell on the playground and had mild wounded knees. In fact, the teacher did put medicine oil on the wounded knees and check the child at the playground at once. What should I do to deal with this case?" (NP-E)

Then, there were lots of different ideas and suggestions for NP-E with regard to the case. Other group members offered various methods and shared their similar experiences with NP-E. NP-E applied some ideas and tried them out in the next day, and then NP-E shared the updates and trailed out results on Facebook in the following evening with the group. As the result, all participants gain new experiences and benefit through this kind of online interaction and communication.

IN PERSON COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

There are several training workshops and

seminars regarding leadership training and technology training.

Leadership seminars are related to leadership and management theories and practices. Technology workshops are related to applications of social media networking systems. All the above workshops and seminars are opened to public and all interested parties in early childhood education field. In addition to the above, tea gatherings are organized every two months, so all participants have opportunities to talk to other experienced/ novice principals and head teachers in order to exchange ideas. Participants can use their real names during the tea gathering, however, they do not have to expose their nick names on Facebook and match with their real names. Everyone only knows their faces and real names, but cannot trace their nick name on Facebook.

SECURITY SETTING ON FACEBOOK

All members are required to set their Facebook group in high security format. All Photos and video are set to be viewed by 'friends only'. All private sharing are written on 'Message' inbox directly sent to mentor(s). This is to protect the privacy of members. However, if participants agree to share with the whole group, they are welcome to do so. When the mentor wants to share some ideas with the whole group, direct writing on the group's wall or note sections is common practice.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The outcome of this project indicates that novice leaders/principals can be empowered and strengthened by collaboration and communication with other novice leaders and experienced leaders. They do not feel lonely in the process of new leadership journey in school. Many of them understand the difficulties and problems which happen in one school normally occur in other schools as well, so they do not feel too frustrated in meeting challenges.

Many of the group members shared that they did learn and gain precious leadership experience by reading others comments and sharing. When they face similar situation, they may be well prepared to face challenges.

This pilot project will last till the end of the school term, more valuable results and comments will be explored in early June 2010. From the preliminary interview results, participants are willing to share their difficulties and successful leadership experiences within the group by using Facebook. They found it practical and convenient without time and space limits. They agree that the feedback and comments from the mentor and two experienced principals were extremely useful and helpful. The novice principals believe that they are better prepared for bigger challenges in their principalship lives because of this supportive online experiences and face-to-face leadership training seminars.

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