

# Creative Leadership and the Professional Learning Communities

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## Abstract

In the following paper, I would like to analyze the connections between creative leadership and professional learning communities, especially focusing on the characteristics of management issue. The structure of the brief study, after the contextual part, is based on a “triangle”, namely from PERSON via PROCESS to ORGANIZATION. Firstly, I emphasize some contextual dimensions (conceptual background) on the topic, secondly on the base of Marzano’s meta-analysis, I introduce 25 categories of principal behavior that positively affect student achievement, attitudes and teacher attitudes and behaviors. Thirdly, I analyze the structuralization of leadership competences, especially focusing on the components, dimensions and indicators on the Ontario Leadership Framework. Fourth, I stress the meaning of creative leadership under the umbrella of social-personality approaches to the study of creativity in order to analyze on the base of Basadur’s four-stage model of creative process. Fifth, I characterize the professional learning communities. Finally, I draw conclusions and summarize my paper.

## Keywords:

creativity	instructional leadership
creative leadership	leading learning
professional learning community	

„Most creative ideas are not flashes of inspiration in an individual’s head but rather come from how people identify, create, store, share and use the knowledge they are exposed to in their surrounding environment.”

(Ryan May)

## 1 Introduction (context, conceptual background)

Let me remind you of Nick Petrie’s future trends and focuses in leadership development (Petrie, 2014), which summarizes four trends for the future of leadership development: “(i) more focus on vertical development, (ii) transfer of greater developmental ownership to the individual, (iii) greater focus on collective rather than individual leadership and (iv) much greater focus on innovation in leadership development methods.” (Petrie, 2011) Briefly introducing these trends, horizontal development has focused on competences, but vertical development stresses developmental stages. Next trend is based on self-responsibility to own progression emphasizing intrinsic motivation and reflective thinking. The third trend has focused on networking connecting with the quality of collaboration and democracy of the organization. Basically, it depends on the decision-making transdisciplinary competence and process. Finally, the last trend has emphasized the importance of creativity and innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the complex environment. However, complexity requires high-quality systematic mind in order to find the balance among these above-mentioned future trends and focuses. Let me underline the importance of creativity as a core competence or life skill of leadership and basic point finding the balance as well.

Following one of the best known leadership experts, Michael Fullan’s statement, namely “the principals is the second most important factors (next to the teachers) in influencing student learning”. (Fullan, 2014) This finding, on the one hand, is based on the Fullan’s over two-decade research work. On the other hand, Fullan’s colleague, Kenneth Leithwood examined and structuralized the leadership competency components (see later)

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and he concluded almost the same relationship. Fullan takes into account Leithwood's conclusion, but digs deeper on impacts of principals. In parallel with Fullan's work, Robert J. Marzano and his colleagues did research on teacher and principal impact on student learning. The data are almost the same as Fullan's and Leithwood's, there is 25% (second importance) principal impact on student learning. Marzano and his colleague's conclusion in the depths, they identified via meta-analysis "25 categories of principal behavior that positively affect the dependent variables of student achievement, student attitudes, student behavior, teacher attitudes, teacher behavior and dropout rates". (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005) The latest research and studies focus on "maximizing impact" of leadership on the rapidly change responsibilities in order to "lead learning". (Fullan, 2014)

I will try to take into account two major conceptual pillars of this study: creative leadership and professional learning community. Introducing some definitions gives the opportunity analyzing the connections between these two pillars.

*"Creative leadership is defined as leadership which encourages, captures, cultivates and implements atypical, imaginative solutions and strategies which produce uncommon results that often ignite and redefine an organization."*<sup>1</sup>

*"Creative leadership is the combination of creativity (the ability to generate ideas) with leadership (the ability to execute them through the actions of others). According to the IBM 2010 study, creativity was the most important skill needed for dealing with complex and turbulent times."*<sup>2</sup>

*"Creative leadership is the concept that leaders who exhibit imaginative and inventive qualities are better able to impact individuals who work underneath them or who look to them for guidance."*<sup>3</sup>

These definitions (examples) on the one hand, indicate the increasing complexity of the leadership role. On the other hand, creativity is a key element of the definition, which is the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes. But this is not (only) the personal ability focusing on creative problem solving, as Csíkszentmihályi claimed: *"creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a socialcultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon."* (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996)

Parallel with the key factor on creative leadership (creative problem solving), from the systematic point of view, professional learning community emphasizes collaborative, organizational learning.

*"A professional learning community, or PLC, is a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students."*<sup>4</sup>

*"Professional learning community (PLC): An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators."*<sup>5</sup>

*"The literature on professional learning communities repeatedly gives attention to five attributes of such organizational arrangements: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice."*<sup>6</sup>

Basically, the common "message" of the above-mentioned definitions is a strong consistency between quality of collaboration and improving learning and teaching and the important role of sharing and creativity on professional learning community.

Finalizing the contextual part, the key question is: How can we find the balance among the four trends for the future of the leadership development? Answering this question, without limitation, the structure of this paper has focused from PERSON via PROCESS to ORGANIZATION dimension. Firstly, I will analyze the role of personal competence components and competence structure on school leadership. Secondly, I will focus on the 4-stage process under the umbrella of organizational and the social-personality approaches to the study of creativity. Thirdly, I will emphasize the characteristics of the professional learning communities.

## 2 Person, Process and Organization

Understanding the changes from personal components, which are based on the behavior categories to the competency structure, there are widespread research data and theoretical study on school leadership from the business and education dimension. Analyzing the core concepts of dominant leadership theories, it is useful to define and differentiate transformational and transactional leadership. The common, basic element is based on the fundamental, pioneer work of James Burns (1978), who is “the founder of modern leadership theory”. His basic definition of leadership is:

*“I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivation – the wants and the needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers’ values and motivations.”* (Burns, p. 19 in Marzano, Waters, McNulty, p. 13)

Indeed, Burns differentiated these two types of leadership making relevant, scientific distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. According to Marzano and his colleagues:

*“In general terms, transactional leadership is defined as trading one thing for another (quid pro quo), whereas transformational leadership is more focused on change.”* (p. 14)

Because of the connection between creative leadership and the professional learning communities has built on handling the change from the systematic dimension, this paper stresses the role of transformational leadership in this process. On the base of this distinction, Bass (1985, 1990) examined four factors of transformational leadership character: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence called “Four I’s”. (Sosik & Dionne, 1997) Leithwood (1994) developed the model of transformational leadership, which is based on the “Four I’s” as basic skills of the leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This skill-based model has enriched the concept of leadership from handling the change to strengthening educational elements. It has been resulted the widespread concept, namely instructional leadership comes into view. For instance, Marzano and his colleagues founded, that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) review of contemporary literature on leadership, the concept of instructional leadership is the most frequent used term in education in North America. (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005). The four dimensions of instructional leadership: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator and visible presence. (Smith and Andrews, 1989) It is remarkable, that the roles of leaders changed and focused on facilitator and coach character. For instance, the Reflection – Growth (RG) model, identified the main characteristics of instructional leadership, namely: encouraging and facilitating the study of teaching and learning, facilitating collaborative efforts among teachers, establishing coaching relationships among teachers, using instructional research to make decisions, and using the principles of adult learning when dealing with teachers. (Blase and Blase, 1999) Hallinger, Murphy, Weil, Mesa and Mitman (1983) emphasized three roles of instructional leaders: defining the school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting a positive school climate.

Marzano, Waters, McNulty (2005) made a meta-analyses and quantitative synthesis on the above-mentioned models and studies in order to list 21 responsibilities of the school leader (affirmation, change agent, contingent rewards, communication, culture, discipline, flexibility, focus, ideals beliefs, input, intellectual stimulation, involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment, knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment, monitoring/evaluating, optimizer, order, outreach, relationships, resources, situational awareness, visibility), which are mainly based on Cotton’s identification of 25 categories (2003) and narrative review of the leadership literature looking for patterns and trends. On the one hand, these concepts, roles and responsibilities have enriched. On the other hand, the skill-based personal components have become complex and there are a lot of new elements of the phenomena of leadership from the “Four I’s” model to the list of 25 categories. This expansion period of transformational and instructional leadership has directed the structuralization of the above-mentioned element turning to the leaders’ competences.

One of the widespread, well-known best practices of the structuralization is the Ontario Leadership Framework (revised in 2013):

*“That is the purpose behind the Ontario Leadership Framework. Based on more than eight years of research by leading experts and extensive consultation with educators across Ontario, the framework provides principals,*

*vice-principals, system leaders and aspiring leaders with a clear leadership roadmap representing leading edge research and the best thinking and experience, of successful leaders across Ontario and around the world.”(p5.)*

From the structuralization point of view, the organization of the roadmap is based on five core leadership capacities:

1. Setting goals
2. Aligning Resources with Priorities
3. Promoting Collaborative Learning Culture
4. Using Data
5. Engaging in Courageous Conversation

Every capacity area as a dimension has operationalized criteria and indicators in order to develop these competences consciously building trust and “intelligent accountability” into the system. There are some horizontal aspects in the roadmap, namely effective dialogue, professional learning and collaboration. The roadmap has progressive approach of leadership professional development as “moving forward”, which has been resulted the change from the personal to the process dimension.

Parallel with increasing complexity of leadership roles and competences, there are some core elements, which determine the process and the organizational dimension as well: continuous processes of thinking innovatively, finding and solving problems creatively and implementing new solutions. These core elements can answer the main challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership, “adaptability is driven by organizational creativity”. (Basadur, 2004) This process is based on applied creativity in order to lead learning, being a district and system player and becoming a change agent. (Fullan, 2014) This is the circular process, which has three phases: problem finding, problem solving and solution implementation in new ways. This three-phase model has changed into the four-stage model. The problem finding phase has divided into two parts: problem generation and problem conceptualization. (Basadur, 2004) Underlining the importance of collaboration and networking in the four-stage model, the process is based on creative teamwork and cooperative learning. From the organizational dimension, promoting collaborative learning requires some components (five learning disciplines): system thinking, personal mastery, team learning, mental models and shared vision. (Senge, 1990) Creative leaders can transform their schools into a learning community via these disciplines. Comparing with the types of leadership on the base of behaviors (see transformational and instructional leadership), the connection between creative leadership and the professional learning community has differentiated the concept of instructional leadership. Facilitative leadership promotes sharing vision and fosters “the growth of teacher leaders and new leadership structures” in the school. Constructivist leadership is based on system thinking via reflection, inquiry, dialogue and action in order to construct knowledge collectively. The concept of distributed leadership is based on the outcomes of the interactions developing organizational adaptability. (Roberts, Pruitt, 2009) The differentiated typology of instructional leadership (Fullan called it leading learning) promotes the professional cycle of transforming learning community. The starting point is changing problem finding (problem generation and problem conceptualization) to the concept of challenge, which is much more proactive and professional than mentally focusing on the problems. The next stage is mapping the prior knowledge (initial thoughts, notions, misconceptions etc.) regarding the challenges (see constructive leadership) giving the opportunity to several forms of interactions. After revising the prior knowledge, strengthening collaboration, it is necessary to organize the second types of group works and workshops in order to “move forward” to the professional learning community. Hord and Sommers describe seven elements of leadership (Seven C’s) “especially related to encouraging, enhancing, and sustaining” professional learning communities: communication, collaboration, coaching, change, conflict, creativity and courage. (Hord, Sommers, 2008) These elements create the connection between creative leadership and the professional learning communities.

### 3 Conclusions

There are two major points analyzing the connection between creative leadership and the professional learning communities. Firstly, the notion, definitions and concepts of leadership has enriched, instructional leadership (leading learning) comes to the front and differentiates (facilitative, constructivist and distributed) leadership. Secondly, on the base of these conceptual changes, the emphasizes turns from the personal components (roles, behaviors and competences) to the cyclic process (see Four-stage model) and the organizational

dimensions (see Seven C's) in order to maximize the impact of the leaders and promoting collaborative learning at the individual level (teachers and pupils) and system level (learning community). Parallel with the growing importance of the process and organizational elements, the collaborative attitudes play more dominant role maximizing the impact of the leaders and professional learning communities. The road is rugged, but full of inspirations, challenges and innovations. As Sir Ken Robinson points out: "The role of a creative leader is not to have all ideas; it's to create a culture where everyone can have ideas and feel that they're valued."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.creativeleadershipcafe.com/blog/what-is-the-definition-of-creative-leadership>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.creativeleader.com/creative-leadership-development/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wisageek.com/what-is-creative-leadership.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://edglossary.org/professional-learning-community/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.allthingsplc.info/about>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html>