
Title	Leadership attributes in a cultural setting in Singapore
Author(s)	Yenming Zhang
Source	<i>ERA Conference, Singapore, 23-25 September 1993</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES IN A CULTURAL SETTING IN SINGAPORE

Yenming Zhang

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
National Institute of Education

Presented at the Seventh Educational Research Association
Annual Conference September 23-25, 1993
Plaza Hotel, Singapore

LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES IN A CULTURAL SETTING IN SINGAPORE

Yenming Zhang

Abstract:

Cultural aspects in leadership are becoming an indispensable yardstick measuring leadership effectiveness. This paper deals with one aspect of cultural leadership: a leader's character and leadership attributes.

In terms of organizational culture, it is the basic values, beliefs, and expectations that will drive the organization. The leader, e.g. a school principal, has the responsibility to design and maintain a workplace as a framework with its unique environment and atmosphere in which teachers and administrators work. It is attempted in this paper to search for some approaches to 1) what are the required roles expected of a leader in building up the strengths of its culture? 2) What are the personal characters that one possesses to be a leader? 3) What are the leadership attributes that one has as a leader? And 4) How do these characters and attributes affect an organization's environment? This paper is the results of discussions with heads of departments of a number of schools, and interviews with school leaders in Singapore and in the United States. Presented in this paper are some marked character differences between leaders in a number of schools in the United States and those in the East like Singapore.

Introduction

At the Principals' Conference held in August, 1993, in Singapore, Singaporean educators stated that a good educational system should be relevant to the times by adjusting to the social changes and challenges. To my understanding, the current external challenges the Singapore educational system is confronted with include the following:

- * How to produce students with high academic performance

to meet prospective employers' requirements;

- * How to lower drop-out rates as advocated by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Third National Day Rally speech on August 15, 1993;

- * How to raise promotion rates from primary to secondary, secondary to junior college, and to institutions of higher education, both in Singapore and abroad;

- * For each school how to compete to maintain the status quo or even to aim at higher status in the ranking system;

- * How to utilize information technology (IT) to help teachers provide more effective instruction that will enhance learning, and to help school administrators to have more effective and efficient administration; and

- * How to design programmes aimed at developing students' personal qualities and potential leaders for modern institutions after graduation.

All this, together with the fast social change and rapid economic development in Singapore, necessitates an ever increasing range of a school principal's responsibilities, an evidence of which can be seen from the Principal's Handbook prepared by the Ministry of Education (MOE), that has been thickening yearly.

In this context, to take their administrative responsibilities successfully requires the principals' *leadership quality*. Both in the West and in Singapore, researchers and educational practitioners refer "leadership quality" as "*effective leadership*". While theories and models of effective leadership in the West have fully developed, school administrators in Singapore are paying much attention to the actual school settings and situations when they talk about effective leadership. They would critically examine whether results of theoretical research conducted in the West have any relevance to the local situations when introduced to Singapore, mainly because of the differences in the cultural settings with divergently distinct value systems.

Amongst theories of organizational leadership, including those of educational leadership, "*cultural leadership*" is

becoming predominant both in the West and in Singapore because in any industrialized economy, the prerequisite of the survival and prosperity of an organization is not only how well it produces quality products and service to the society, but how excellently it develops its members in terms of their career and professional development. Take schools in the United States, for example. It has appeared as a trend that teachers, as well as administrators, were treated as workers up to the early 1980s; one decade ago, as semi-professionals; and in recent years, a debate has been going on at Harvard University Graduate School of Education on the stand point that teachers should be regarded as professionals. This will mean that teachers' status is raised and so are the requirements. Both in the United States and in Singapore settings, what a school principal has to bear in mind is a two-faceted task: how to get an all-round development for pupils--academically and personally--to be qualified products for institutions in the society, and meanwhile, how to actualize the career development for the staff.

Based on this analysis, I would argue that the principal of a school will be the one who designs and develops an atmosphere in which teachers and administrators are able to actualize their career development and students their potential. This atmosphere is the main part of what is referred to as *cultural leadership*. The major elements of a school culture are as follows:

- * Surroundings-- the utilities and facilities of the school;
- * Atmosphere-- how teachers, and administrators feel about their school as a workplace;
- * Framework-- the school administrative hierarchy and the structure and components of the programme; and
- * Environment-- neighbourhood schools as competitors, and institutions in the society as "customers".

It is the above four elements that make a school's culture unique, different from one another. While the first element is fundamental, and the third essential, the second element is crucial since it is the atmosphere of a school that

has an influence on the stand of the school, and ultimately, on the last element--environment, in competition with other schools and in meeting social demands.

In cultural leadership, an organization leader is the creator of the *organizational culture* (e.g. "corporate culture" in business, and "school culture" in education). Now that the principal has the utmost control over the atmosphere, she or he is the creator of the atmosphere. The qualities required of the principal are of great importance. These qualities include *Reality-centered Leadership; Leader authenticity; Personal characters; and Leadership attributes.*

Two Crucial Qualities Required of a Principal

1. Reality-centered Leadership

In his article "What Makes a Good School?" Theodore Sizer, former dean of Harvard University Graduate School of Education, states that "Good schools reflect their communities; this means that no two good schools are ever quite alike." (Sizer 1992) Because communities are culturally characteristic of unity and diversity, principals, under the school's mission, needs to develop a collective vision of where they want their schools to go. With this as a guidance, it is the principal who makes the school embody the personalities of its students and its teachers, and make the school the special creation of its own faculty that is to be "responsive and respectful toward the needs of the students and the priorities of the community". (Sizer 1992)

In a school in Singapore, the quality of reality-centered leadership may be required of school principals. But there are two fundamental differences. First, the community in which the school is located is at a lower degree of diversity. Although it is a fact that Singapore is a multicultural and multiracial society, parents' expectations of their children are different, from a Malay family to a Chinese family, and schools' missions are generally similar under the shared national goal and values whereas there is no shared national values in the United States for schools to comply with.

The other difference lies in the reality that, compared with the loose-structured community and lower parental expectations in the United States, schools in Singapore have a more closely-knit community and higher parental expectations in this central controlled educational system. Hence the saying in the U.S. "schools are often bellwethers of the future" only reflects educators' ideal in the U.S. while it carries more weight in a school in Singapore.

To realize the ideal of "bellwethers of the future", American school principals rely on teachers, counsellors, staff and administrators as the schools' "permanent" folk. While a school principal in Singapore relies on the whole staff, academic and non-academic, with an emphasis on the school's core of veteran teachers and administrators because of three factors: 1) Principals expect new teachers to be well prepared academically and well trained professionally, which takes time; 2) Turnover rate is higher because of high pressure and heavy stress that are comparatively much higher than American teacher have; and 3) Senior teachers have much higher degree of loyalty and co-operation than those in the U.S. schools. Principals have to lead the faculty, especially the senior ones, in carrying out their collective responsibilities, taking their environment seriously, and constantly reevaluating their programmes in terms of schools' progress toward the chosen vision.

2. Leader Authenticity

The principal is the leader of the school. The values, beliefs, and behaviours of the principal constantly affect those of the staff and students as those values filter down to administrators, teachers, and students through day-to-day administration. In order to lead the staff effectively, that is, to affect subordinates positively with the principal's values so as to have close followers, the principal has to understand correctly how she or he is perceived. In other words, what her or his image is like in the followers' eye as a leader as well as a person. This required quality is

constantly often by superintendents in a school district to school principals in the U.S. This quality of understanding how the principal is perceived--based on an assumption that sometimes a difference exists between what the principal believes others think and what others actually think--is called "*perceived authenticity*". The three major areas of perceived authenticity are as follows:

- * The principal's personality overcomes role requirements, which indicates that the school's bureaucratic structure never engulfs the leader;

- * Administrators, staff, and teachers should not be manipulated. It is the administrators and teachers, not the principal, who use their skills and talents in administration and teaching;

- * The principal is accountable and accepts responsibility for her or his deeds, especially mistakes. (Henderson 1981)

The dual purposes of leader authenticity are 1) By measuring their perceived authenticity, principals can learn valuable information as to how they are viewed by their subordinates; and 2) By understanding to what extent to which subordinates view principals as being genuine, they are able to gauge realistic subordinates' perceptions so that they will adapt timely their values and modify their behaviours, provided their subordinates provide candid feedback and principals are willing to see what their images are like in the followers' eye.

James Henderson, Rutgers University, U.S., developed a *Leader Authenticity Scale (LAS)* in 1981, which consists of 32 statements. From 1986 to 1991, I interviewed some 70 heads of department principals, and teachers, in schools in the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts, using this *LAS* (Appendix 1). Since late 1992 I have discussed with around 70 heads of department, principals and teachers in Singapore. The results of the survey reveal similarity of principal's leadership characters--in the way both American and Singaporean teachers, heads of department perceive their principals-- in the following 12 major statements:

* The principal is obsessed with rules. (statement 1. Spread out from "Agree Strongly" to "Disagree Strongly")

* The principal is honest in face-to-face interactions. (statement 6. Agree Strongly)

* Many times the principal will say one thing to teachers and something quite different to students or parents. (statement 7. Disagree Strongly)

* The principal is authentic. (statement 8. Agree Strongly)

* The Principal's beliefs and actions are consistent. (statement 10. Agree Somewhat)

* It's an unwritten rule around here that you don't criticize the principal. (statement 12. Spread out on the scale)

* After meeting together in situations like evaluation conferences, I feel that I know the principal better as a person. (statement 16. Agree Strongly)

* If something goes wrong in the school, the principal is sure to blame someone else on the staff. (statement 20. Disagree Strongly)

* The principal manipulates the teachers. (statement 24. Disagree Strongly)

* The principal is phony. (statement 25. Disagree Strongly)

* The principal accepts responsibility for the principal's own action and for the progress of the school. (statement 27. Agree Strongly)

* Whenever authority is delegated to a staff member, the principal stands behind that person. (statement 30. Agree Strongly)

Ever since Henderson developed the *LAS*, which is used by school administrators and teachers, research has shown that as the level of perceived principal authenticity increases so does the openness of school climate, and effectiveness of principal's leadership that enhances staff's morale, encourages supportive and trusting relationship. As a result, all this generates a school atmosphere that is conducive to

teachers' teaching and students' learning, and therefore increases school's productivity.

Based on the results of the survey conducted in Connecticut and Massachusetts, U.S. and in Singapore, it is obvious that most of the principals are genuine rather than phony; robust instead of puny. I would suggest that educational institutions in Singapore develop a principal authenticity scale, if they do not have to copy Henderson's LAS, to measure principal's authenticity. While there is a regular and systematic usage of LAS in American schools for principals to better understand how their subordinates view their leadership quality, Singapore schools have not used an instrument like LAS to reflect principals' images. Further, American principals are more democratic than Singaporean counterparts, many of whom are found autocratic and domineering. However, this kind of authenticity seems to be effective in the Singaporean setting because culturally and traditionally, subordinates show respect to their leaders and are much more obedient than their American counterparts. I would argue that as times change, with the progress of professionalization of the teaching career, and with the realization of teachers' self-actualization, principals may find that being autocratic or domineering may not be as effective as before. And principals may have to change their styles accordingly, for otherwise their traditional styles may hinder their authenticity.

The necessity for principals to collect regularly staff's perception in a large scale in the school stems from the reality in Singapore where, as a trend, more and more schools are having ever higher degrees of autonomy--from programme designation to staff components. For one thing, in comparison, there is a paradox in the U.S. educational systems. "Most school principals do not have autonomy. Decision making is the realm of the superintendent but at the same time they are expected to be great visionaries. (Otero-Alvarez 1992) Most principals find that they do not have the power to hire, fire, decide curriculum, or plan innovative

programmes. Whereas schools in Singapore, government or independent ones, are having to a greater extent autonomy in hiring staff and in deciding their programmes, albeit the educational system is still a central controlled one.

On the other hand, because of the nature of work in a school in Singapore where both principals and staff have heavier pressure than American counterparts from their community, mostly from parents, principals' concern is greater than an American principal regarding the staff morale and above all the school's productivity. Without understanding correctly staff's view of principal's leadership quality, the principal can not have an effective, and lasting, leadership.

Leaders' Character and Attributes in the U.S.

The following two lists show a leader's character and attributes in organizations in the U.S.

List 1. Leader Characteristics That Followers Admire
(by Ranking)

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPER LEADERS			
1	Honest	11	Supportive
2	Competent	12	Courageous
3	Forward-looking	13	Caring
4	Inspiring	14	Cooperative
5	Intelligent	15	Mature
6	Fair-minded	16	Ambitious
7	Broad-minded	17	Determined
8	Straight- forward	18	Self-controlled
9	Imaginative	19	Loyal
10	Dependable	20	Independent

These lists are developed by John Gardner, a specialist on leadership, whose research findings have made great contributions to and influence on organizational leadership.

List 2. Leader's Attributes

ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERS			
1	Physical Vitality & Stamina	8	Capacity to Motivate
2	Intelligence & Judgment-in-Action	9	Courage & Steadiness
3	Willingness to Accept Responsibilities	10	Capacity to Win & Hold Trust
4	Task Competence	11	Capacity to Manage, Decide & Set Priorities
5	Understanding Followers	12	Confidence
6	Skill in Dealing with People	13	Ascendance & Dominance
7	Need to Achieve	14	Adaptability & Flexibility

Source: John Gardner. On Leadership. 1992.

Some characters and attributes shown in the two lists are overlapping. For instance, "Competence", "Intelligence", and "Courage". Now let us make further comparisons by examining leaders' personal characters as results of research in Singapore, both in schools and in other organizations.

List 3. Effective Principals

Assertive
Aggressive
Authoritative
Competitive
Stubborn
Independent-minded
Unconventional
Emphasises productivity
More considerate and adaptable

Source: Lim Soon Tze of MOE's Curriculum Development
Institute of Singapore. 1993

List 4. Leader Qualities

Strong will
Informed judgment
Intelligence
Integrity
A feel for the people
Big match temperament

Source: Leslie Fong. 1993

The characters in List 3 are researchers' findings, while the qualities in List 4 are what subordinates expect their leaders to possess. The attributes on the left hand column of List 5 are the major characters Singaporean school administrators and teachers see in their principals.

List 5. A Principal's Attributes
From Subordinates' Point of View

EAST	OVERLAPPING WITH WEST
Self-controlled	Self-controlled
Loyal	Ambitious
Traditional/Conservative	Determined/Decisive
Ambitious	Mature
Determined/Decisive	Dependable
Mature	Independent
Dependable	Confident
Autocratic	Courageous
Diligent	Intelligent
Domineering	Stamina
Independent	Trust
Confident	Responsible
Perseverant	Assertive
Competitive	Inspiring
Courageous	Honest
Intelligence	Competent
Considerate	Caring
Stamina	Fair-minded
Trust	Cooperative
Responsible	
Broad-minded	
Task-oriented	
Assertive	
Inspiring	
Honest	
Competent	
Caring	
Fair-minded	
Cooperative	

Analysis of Principals' Attributes

A. Overlapping ones. Many of the characters of leaders in Singapore and in the U.S. are overlapping, as shown in the right hand column of List 5. This indicates that basic qualities of a leader, no matter in the West or in the East, are similar.

B. Unique Characters in Singapore. Singapore principals have such characters, which are difficult to find in an American principal, as follows:

Autocratic, Domineering;
Diligent, Perseverant;
Integrity, Competitive.

C. Major Differences in Overlapping Characters:

Because of the central controlled leadership from the MOE down, Singaporean principals have much higher level of being "loyal", "task-oriented", and "conservative", than that of American principals. They have relatively lower level of "courageous", "self-controlled", and "ambitious", than their American counterparts.

D. Areas Where Singaporean Principals To Improve:

A Strong Will In the Singapore setting, where parents and community are more demanding, principals are more concerned about productivity, namely, high percentages of students' passes; of distinctions; of promotion/college going rates, especially when confronted with the controversial ranking system. A "strong will", as suggested by Leslie Fong, is the most important core attribute and *quality of resolution* in carrying out the school's mission and in realizing the school's vision.

Being Unconventional Given more autonomy and authority in leading a school, the principal has to be less conservative and more unconventional for the sake of students' personal development and staff's professional development in fierce competition. This again requires the quality of inspiring the

staff for them to follow the principal. To be autocratic and domineering will make teachers and administrators get things done, which is often measured by quantity, not quality, because the effect of autocracy requests compliance instead of commitment. Also, to be unconventional needs courage in front of "danger" and "chance". Americans are more courageous in risk taking, and more out going for taking advantages of chances, while Singaporeans, whose personal beliefs are embedded in the Eastern culture, are less bold in taking personal risks and in taking advantage of chances. Since the Singaporean educational system is more closely linked to the national economic development that depends on schools to produce a workforce with modern knowledge and traditional values, with potential leadership qualities to assume leading positions in organizations, "courage" is no doubt a prerequisite and a predominant quality possessed by an effective principal in setting the school culture.

Summary

In this paper I focus on one of the cultural aspects of leadership--school principals' personal characters and leadership attributes--and make some comparisons between American principals and Singaporean principals. The principal is the creator of her or his school's culture that compasses four elements: surroundings, atmosphere, framework, and environment. According to Maxwell Taylor, there are three characteristics in common among successful leaders, known as "trio of virtues"--

1. Outstanding for professional competence: You know your business and your staff know you know;

2. Justified confidence: You possess inner strength and a strong character; and

3. Gifted in human understanding: Sometimes you are *Stern*, sometimes *Exacting*, sometimes *Tolerant*, and sometimes *Lenient* (SETL).

To my understanding, Singaporean principals are qualified in regard to the first and second characteristics. The third

characteristic is the one some Singaporean principals need to improve on. American school leaders are more flexible than Singaporean principals, many of whom, if not all, are stubborn and rigid. This inflexible character may affect leadership effectiveness in the long run. For those principals, they know that being authoritarian is faulty but they demand subordinates' unquestionable obedience to authority. In a culture in Singapore, subordinates have respect for their leaders. But respect should be shown in a mutual way. It is not enough to give orders only, but to provide instruction and explanation. Principals do conduct conferences to hear staff's say, but more often than not they come to the meetings with decisions already made and are unwilling to change them. They know it is not advisable to be autocratic, but they tend to be domineering. This is because school administration is largely task-oriented and more tilted to management. However, principals need to be sensitive to the effect of their leadership attributes, and to understand their followers, using the idea of *SETL*, as shown above.

According to Lee Bolman, "Leadership is often the key difference between schools that work and those that don't. It's not a magic solution to every educational problem, but it's a key part of any effort to make schools better." (Bolman 1992) The principal, either in a school in the U.S. or in Singapore, plays an important leadership role in setting the tone and in creating the climate of the school. Schools are bellwethers of the future, and principals are bellwethers of their schools. It is the leadership quality, including "leader authenticity", and "human understanding" that will stand a principal in good stead, in terms of leadership effectiveness.

My understanding of Singaporean principals' attributes is yet limited and my research in this area is still at its early stage, therefore, findings in this paper may not be inclusive and need to be proved by further empirical research.

REFERENCES:

- Fong, Leslie. "What qualities would you want in political leaders?" in The Straits Times. Singapore. November 28, 1992. p. 33.
- Gardner, John. On Leadership. New York: The Free Press. 1990. Chapter 5. Attributes, pp. 48-54.
- Henderson, James. "Leader Authenticity Scale" in The School Administrator. U.S. March, 1989. p. 29.
- Leong, Chan Telk. "Teach initiative, daring, principals urged" in The Straits Times. Singapore. September 7, 1993. p. 3.
- Lord, Deane. "New academy is designed to improve school leadership" in Harvard Graduate School of Education Bulletin. Volume XXXVI, Number 2, Winter/Spring 1991-92. U.S. p. 5.
- Miskel, Cecil. "Developing Principals to be Effective Leaders" in Singapore Journal of Education. Volume. 13, Number 2, 1993. U.S. pp. 8-23.
- Otero-Alvarez, Margarita. "Dilemmas of a Principal" in Harvard Graduate School of Education Bulletin. Volume XXXVII, Number 3, June 1993. U.S. pp. 10-11.
- "Principals: How Authentic Are You?" in The School Administrator. March, 1989. U.S. p. 28.
- Sizer, Theodore. "What Makes a Good School?" in Harvard Graduate School of Education Bulletin. Volume XXXVI, Number 3, Spring/Summer 1992. U.S. pp. 17-19.
- Tan, Rachel. "Principals who consult their staff 'stand to gain'" in The Straits Times. Singapore. September 7, 1993. p. 19.
- Yukl, Gary. Leadership in Organizations. Second Edition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989. Chapter 5. yEffective Leadership Behavior. pp. 74-95.