

Social Internet's Impact on Educational Leadership

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The internet has impacted society in America and beyond in recent times, through the evolution of the World Wide Web to one that is far more participatory, called a “read/write web” (Hendron, 2008). The term *social media* relates to the most recent evolution, epitomized by online services such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. These services connect both like-minded and disparate communities through websites and mobile applications. The explosion of content online since the emergence of the Web in the early 1990s is proportional to our ability to not only access (read) information, but create it ourselves (Jenkins, et al., 2009). A key concern to today's education leaders should be how the ubiquitous presence of social networking in and outside of the workplace can affect our role of leadership. Specifically, as we consider our perspective following the four frames of leadership defined by Bolman and Deal (2008), how might each frame be affected by the likes of social media and other read/write genres such as blogs and podcasts?

To answer this question, we will take each of Bolman and Deal's frames and illustrate the impact of social and read/write tools and services with examples. Henceforth, we will refer to this mixture of read/write tools and social services as the *social internet*. The social internet has contributed towards the creation of new media where anyone can broadcast a rich variety expression through text, photos, and video (Shirky, 2010). Shirky (2008) describes this change as “epochal” as “social tools are dramatically improving our ability to share, cooperate, and act together” (Epilogue). The tools of the social internet however can impact sharing, cooperation, and acting as a community in negative ways as well. We believe in their roles, education leaders today must assess both the positive and negative impact of the social internet.

Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames are different lenses from which to view leadership challenges. Their theory defines four: structural, political, symbolic, and human resource. As each frame calls upon the leader to change perspective, the ubiquitous nature of the social internet today offers new opportunities for communication and interaction with school stakeholders. While the popular social network Facebook was born in the college environment of Harvard, the social internet has more slowly penetrated the K-12 sector (edWeb et al., 2010), with authors such as myself endorsing a migration of the social internet into public schools. "The culture [that ignited the social internet] would do well to find a home in today's schools, in order for our students to find success today and in the future" (Hendron, 2008, p. 13). While Prensky (2004) believes students today, whom he terms "digital natives" have a "desire to create" (p. 6) using digital tools, Knobel and Lankshear (2006) believe the tools of the social internet can improve education (specifically, to become more effective and powerful writers) (p. 72). One obstacle behind the adoption of the social internet for its pedagogical benefits may be the slow adoption rate by school administrators.

In a 2010 study, school administrators reported seeing benefits to participation in the social internet, including "sharing information and resources; to create professional learning communities; and to improve school-wide communications with students and staff" (edWeb et al., 2010, p. 4). The same study reported that fifty-four percent of principals had joined a social network; thirty-one percent used YouTube, and twenty-eight percent used podcasts for professional purposes. Barriers toward the adoption of social tools included "opening the door to negativity and/or becoming an arena for complaints," a "need to maintain an educational focus for online discussions," and "security concerns" (p. 16). Looking forward, we hope to reveal positive rationale for utilizing the social internet.

The Structural Frame

This first frame concerns us with placing members of an organization in the right roles and relationships. Hierarchy defines the view of the organization, with each member oriented in what we might call a vertical structure. Bolman and Deal (2008) tell us that “a significant amount of time and attention must be devoted to social architecture—designing structure that allows people to do their best” (p. 51). When the leader utilizing this frame is successful, they may be seen as an architect or analyst. When done poorly, they are seen as a tyrant (p. 356). Some tools defined by the social internet can break-down the structural relationships in a school. Instead of a vertical structure, a horizontal one emerges, where anyone can interact directly with the building administrator, sidestepping any middle echelons of management. Where this should concern us is when these tools can improve an organization’s efficiency, by lowering what Shirky (2008) calls *transaction costs*. “New social tools are altering this equation by lowering the costs of coordinating group action. The easiest place to see this change is in activities that are too difficult to be pursued with traditional management but have become possible with new forms of coordination” (Chapter 2, para. 16). Shirky believes loosely-connected groups of people can achieve goals “operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive” (Chapter 2, Section 4, para. 11).

Instead of using middle management to assess thoughts about a new project across an organization, a leader today can engage the use of a tool such as *Google Moderator*. This tool queries input from individuals and ideas are then able to be voted-on by all participants. What emerges in short time are the group’s strongest ideas. Everyone’s opinion has equal weight. The challenge to the leader is giving up control through the structural frame to honor the voices of all members of the organization. The benefit with using social internet within a school in this way is

exposing authentic ideas from across the spectrum of stakeholders. The social internet as a platform gives participants space in which to communicate and even achieve goals without the traditional barriers of the structural frame, and even beyond constructs of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006).

A potential barrier to the leader using the structural frame might be an unwillingness by some employees to communicate openly. We will address supporting members of the organization with the social internet in the section below focused on the human resource frame.

The Political Frame

While the social internet used within the workplace can support the organization's mission through the sharing of authentic opinion, outside the organization it can present challenges of power or criticism. Within schools, a leader must deal with stakeholders beyond those of employee and student; parents and community members can figure into the equation of politics. Defining what they call the political frame, Bolman and Deal (2008) tell us that "since organizations depend on their environment for resources they need to survive, they are inevitably enmeshed with external constituents whose expectations or demands must be heeded. These constituents often speak with loud but conflicting voices, adding to the challenge of managerial work" (p. 235). If they are to reveal political savvy, educational leaders then must deal with the voices of parents communicating through social media, just as corporations must do with customers leveraging criticism of their products.

An example of social media impacting the political health of CBS News anchor Dan Rather in 2004 illustrates the importance of the political frame (Osgood, 2005). Under fire for his shoddy reporting of damning documents critical of then President George W. Bush, political bloggers organized a national discussion over Rather's fitness as an objective news reporter.

While Rather did speak out in defense of his reporting (Skolnik, 2006), his voice was too late to match the viral criticism born from the blogosphere. More importantly, Rather's comments were confined to traditional media such as television.

The challenge to the leader in the political frame with regards to the social internet is to participate in the same social spaces as critics. Whether critics are angry parents about a policy change in your school, or critics questioning the authenticity of documents you claim are the smoking gun on the evening news, politically-savvy leaders are disadvantaged if they are not responding quickly in the growing ubiquity of social media. Universal traits of honesty, integrity, and transparency in leadership can translate into social communications. One benefit of participating in the social internet as a leader involves establishing your own voice beyond the physical space of your organization through tools like blogs and podcasts (Hendron, 2008). This can aid in rallying the leader's supporters when constituents beyond your structural control become critics.

Shirky (2010) tells us that "loosely coordinated groups with a shared culture" (like a community supporting a school) can "perform tasks more effectively than individuals, more effectively than markets using price signals, and more effectively than governments using managerial direction" (p. 129). The leader enacting the political frame must therefore become a proactive "advocate and negotiator" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 356) within spaces defined by the social internet, and not wait to participate through blogs or social networks until something worth criticizing arises. Next, we look at establishing culture with the social internet.

The Symbolic Frame

Shirky (2008) warns us that "there is no recipe for the successful use of social tools. Instead, every working system is a mix of social and technological factors" (Chapter 11, para. 1).

Bolman and Deal's symbolic frame (2008) deals with the traditions, culture, and ceremony that help define an organization. Therefore the challenge with social internet for the leader is transferring the essential elements of the organization's symbolic language through new social uses of technology. Specifically how could we leverage symbolic thinking to address the needs of students through social media?

Henry Jenkins, a well-regarded student of participatory culture, tells us that "Our goals should be to encourage youths to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture" (Jenkins, 2009, "Enabling Participation," para. 12). Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) see the social, participatory nature of today's social internet explosion as an ingredient in a new phase of education, one that is individualized for students, which Christensen calls a *disruptive innovation*. While participation in the social internet is a seemingly natural, commonplace behavior for today's youth with ninety-five percent of teens in the U.S. now online (Lenhart et al., 2011), the job of school leadership is both providing access to the social internet for educational purposes, and also articulating and establishing norms for the culture that will help define participation. The same symbols we use in a school to encourage skill development, ethical understanding, and student self-confidence have a place in online, social spaces.

Bolman and Deal (2008) tell us that good leaders emerge using the symbolic frame as poets or prophets. Failed leaders appear as charlatans. The difference, we might argue, is one of authenticity. The educational leader needs to connect the experience of learning in online social learning platforms (Facebook, Ning, Moodle, or Blackboard) to the culture, tradition, and language inside the school. Shirky (2010) believes "how we treat one another matters," for "our behavior contributes to an environment that encourages some opportunities and hinders others"

(p. 135). Shirky (2010) sees value in connecting individuals online because we are also elementally social. “We also have an emotional mind; we can enter into deep bonds with other people that transcend our individual intellects” (p. 163). The challenge for the leader using the symbolic frame therefore is taking full stock of the “symbols” used, their emotional affect, and addressing these through the social internet. This means taking stock of what values and traditions are a part of school culture, for culture according to Bolman and Deal (2008) is a “superglue” that bonds and unites people (Chapter 12). While the educational leader is not responsible for creating the culture of a school from scratch, those elements we identify as culture can help support a successful migration with social internet tools.

As an example, the 2011 Pew Internet study found fifteen percent of social media-using teens had been a target of online meanness. Forty-one percent reported at least one negative outcome from their participation in these same spaces (Lenhart et al., 2011). In order for these same spaces to be used as a true disruptive innovation in school, educational leaders, we feel, must prepare the positive values of the school’s culture (one of respect, with more positive outcomes than negative) to be present as symbols in the social internet spaces. Pragmatically, this will require participation by a variety of stakeholders—representing the school community—with the social internet.

The Human Resource Frame

Bolman and Deal’s (2008) final frame concerns itself with valuing the individuals within an organization and addressing their personal needs and motivations. The successful leader using this frame is viewed as a catalyst; the unsuccessful leader is a pushover or weakling (p. 356). An appropriate example illustrating the impact of the social internet on this frame might mention *communities of practice*, a term describing people who both understand one another, and also

form to share knowledge. Shirky (2010) contends that communities of practice are “more about maintaining the cultural norms that hold the community together than about preserving any particular bit of knowledge the group holds” (p. 143). Within school culture, natural communities may form, including teachers within a grade level, teachers within a subject-specific department, or technology specialists between buildings. Yet Shirky also believes the tools new to the social internet enable new kinds of group forming (Shirky, 2008, p. 15). He sees among the roles of communities of practice their ability to support their individual members, including their personal needs and motivations (Shirky, 2010, p. 156). We see opportunities in social internet for supporting individuals—such as teachers—through the lens of the human resource frame.

The school administrator can espouse teachers through either providing or promoting group- or community-supporting tools (these may include names we have already referenced, such as Facebook, Twitter, Ning, or Google Groups). These spaces specifically can extend the walls and reach of the traditional teacher's lounge, especially when they are not specifically tied to one school. One such example is *Classroom 2.0*, a Ning-based social network centered around the use of the social internet in the classroom. Ning networks support discussion threads, individual blogs, and space for shared resources such as lesson plans, links to recommended websites, and videos. This example is international in scope and teachers willingly share best practices, but discussions also extend to dealing with personal conflicts and dealing with troublesome parents.

To support teachers via the human resource frame, school administrators can provide access to online communities like *Classroom 2.0* during school hours. This aligns with McGregor's thinking of “Theory Y” in his dichotomy of two different self-fulfilling prophecies (McGregor, 1960). The fact that a community exists at all in the *Classroom 2.0* Ning site is

evidence that at least in some schools, teachers are accepting and seeking responsibility, that they apply self-direction towards their professional objectives, and as McGregor tells us, they are not part of the “Theory X” cadre that prefers only to be directed by others. The community of practice that develops without management at all through online communities like *Classroom 2.0* point to another benefit in the human resource frame—that employees can develop interpersonal support systems on the job (Bolman & Deal, 2008, Chapter 8). By supporting the access to, and participation in online social networks, school leaders can provide support for the challenges teachers face without an outlay of capital by the school or district.

Conclusion

Our journey between the four frames for organizational leadership by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2008) traversed positive examples that the social internet provides educational leaders today. Because the social tools and genres of expression are still new, we are bound to find examples where the social internet does not help the educational leader, but instead provides its own set of real challenges. The examples provided in the examination of each of the four frames can hopefully begin to assuage school leaders’ fears about engaging social networking because of angry parents, or leaders’ own naïveté about how to apply leadership behaviors (edWeb et al., 2010). Optimistically as the social internet matures, the penetration of social media into schools continues to rise at the same time that the tools and services ripen with potential.

While it is important to remember that the social internet is simply a new set of tools for communication and collaboration, it is human behavior that turns these tools into positive or negative outcomes. Professor Shirky is a strong advocate for the power of group-forming and social collaboration and has been an ally in this presentation for the positive potential for the

social internet. His thinking is not in opposition to that of James Surowiecki. In Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2005), he defines four conditions for groups to make decisions that better those of experts: diversity of opinion, independence of members from one another, decentralization, and a good method for aggregating opinions. The social internet is a prime mechanism today for decentralized group-forming that can attract a diversity of membership from different localities with the tools for sharing and communicating opinion.

The challenge for today's educational leader is not whether or not to ignore the impact of the social internet on society. Instead, it is how to consider the role social media plays or can play in at least four different frames of leadership. The structural, political, symbolic, and human resource frames by Bolman and Deal each can leverage the social internet to improve the leader's potential for overcoming challenge. In each case, it is familiarity and participation with the tools of the social internet that can well-position the leader to be prepared for positive, rather than negative impacts, that can affect all stakeholders in the educational arena, including students, parents, and teachers. In each case, the social internet challenges the hierarchy of the school organization, the political relationships between stakeholders, the power of culture and instruction, and addressing the needs of the individuals of the organization. Further research should address the pragmatic applications of read/write and social media to both improve instruction in schools and to positively affect the role of school and district leaders.

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