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Student Affairs Leadership and Loyalty: Organizational Dynamics at Play

Florence Guido-DiBrito

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*The author explores the meanings and manifestations of
loyalty using a qualitative study of leaders and followers
on four college campuses.*

I am solicited, not by a few,
And those of true condition, that your subjects
Are in great grievance: there have been commissions Sent
down among 'em, which hath flaw'd the heart Of all their
loyalties.

William Shakespeare
Henry VIII
Act I, Scene I

Loyalty has been defined as an important component of leadership in political, sociological, managerial, and educational contexts (Barth, 1965; Blau & Scott, 1962; Hoy, Newland, & Blazovsky, 1977; Kanter, 1977). Although scholars and lay persons alike attach a highly charged, unbending emotion to loyalty, a consistent definition has not evolved. It appears to mean different things to different people. Some refer to loyalty between leaders and followers in the abstract as if it were an ideal long dead. Others, like Shakespeare, warn us that rules imposed on followers, rather than created or supported by them, diminish follower loyalty.

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This article explores the meanings and manifestations of loyalty using a qualitative study of leaders and followers on four college campuses. Specifically, the study examined loyalty between college presidents, senior student affairs officers (SSAOs), and their subordinates. Three major concepts emerged: the nature of loyalty, personal dynamics of loyalty, and organizational dynamics of loyalty that affect leader and follower relationships (DiBrito, 1990). The article discusses only the organizational dynamics affecting leaders and followers.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Loyalty was first recognized as essential to organizational life early in the 20th century (Barnard, 1938). Ascribed to followers who displayed individual willingness to cooperate with leaders, it was a most prized personal quality. Later, loyalty became a necessary quality for controlling others in an organization (Perrow, 1986). Cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions were then identified in an attempt to quantify loyalty. In a classic work on the sociology of complex organizations, Blau and Scott (1962) first introduced subordinate loyalty to a superior as an important component of work relations in hierarchical organizations. When defining loyalty, Blau and Scott stated merely that superiors who command loyalty are "liked, accepted, and respected" (p. 144).

Seeking a more rigorous definition, Murray and Correnblum (1966) added cognitive and behavior dimensions. From their perspective, loyalty manifests itself cognitively as an unquestioning faith and trust in a superior as a leader. Behaviorally, it manifests itself as the actual or expressed willingness to remain with or follow a leader to another job. With the exceptions of these limited definitions in cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains, no research exists that conceptualizes loyalty between leader and follower in a student affairs organization.

Much of the empirical research on loyalty is limited to an upward flow in an organizational hierarchy. For whatever reason, no empirical research has examined loyalty flowing downward in an organizational pyramid. As teamwork plays an increasingly important role in institutional decision-making (Helgesen, 1990), so does the ability to enhance interpersonal bonds among all organizational members (Neff & Harwood, 1990; Rogers, 1992).

Loyalty has particular importance for SSAOs (Clement & Rickard, 1992). Experienced practitioners connect SSAOs' loyalty to success and effectiveness in student affairs. Loyalty manifests itself in identifying with the institutional mission and administrative structure, supporting the senior executive officer, dealing directly with a superior or subordinate, and understanding the importance of administrative and personal loyalty to superiors, subordinates, and colleagues (Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978). These characteristics offer insight into the complexity of loyalty in student affairs, but are not empirically based. Ultimately, loyalty between SSAO, superior, and subordinate must not conflict with the central goal of student development or student affairs administrators will lose the respect of the academic community (Winston & McCaffrey, 1983).

This article examines how loyalty between SSAOs and their superiors and subordinates is affected by various organizational factors such as structure, mission and goals, behavior and power, professional expectations, and decision-making. The discussion is based on interviews with college and university administrators at four different case study sites, using the constructivist paradigm and its assumptions as a framework.

METHODOLOGY

A constructivist paradigm was chosen because the elusive quality of loyalty is best examined by focusing on the nature of knowledge, reality, and human expression using an interdisciplinary approach (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The underlying assumptions of constructivism place importance on multiple constructed realities, value-bound inquiry, inseparable interaction between the knower and the known, and entities being in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 38). In this study, each participant's reality concerning the meaning and manifestation of loyalty is revealed in the setting where it exists, thereby evoking the broadest range of loyal sentiment and behavior.

SAMPLING

The sample was selected to uncover a broad range of responses in order to identify the scope of loyalty between leaders and followers in four student affairs organizations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln, 1985). A type of purposive sampling, convenience sampling (Patton, 1980), was employed. Specifically, the sample consisted of one female SSAO and her superior and subordinates at a medium-size (13,000 students), land-grant institution in one state; and one male SSAO and his superiors and subordinates at a large (39,000 students) land-grant institution in another state. It also consisted of one female SSAO at a private, independent, coeducational institution enrolling 7,000 students in one state; and one male SSAO at an independent, coeducational institution in another state. Ultimately, four SSAOs, four college presidents, one executive vice president, and 41 directors and department heads were interviewed. Fifty-four participants were interviewed all together, at four institutions in three states in the Southwest.

DATA COLLECTION

The primary data for this exploratory study were collected through unstructured interviews with participants. Each participant was asked slightly different questions. No formal interview guide was developed, but questions focused on several issues: (a) the participant's background, (b) the participant's management and leadership style, (c) the management and leadership style of superiors and subordinates, (d) the participant's definition of loyalty between superior and subordinate in a student affairs organization, (e) the participant's personal and professional relationships with subordinates and superiors, and (f) how interpersonal loyalty manifests itself in these relationships.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method for discovering theory from data, including member checks, unitizing, categorizing, and filling in patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Lincoln, 1985). A case study audit was conducted following data analysis in order to confirm the findings and themes identified. Detailed, descriptive cases were written to reveal the nature and manifestations of interpersonal loyalty between the SSAOs and their superiors and subordinates. Themes and patterns were then derived from the collected data to offer insight into the existence of loyalty.

Finally, the study operationalized criteria for insuring trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In constructivist methodologies, trustworthiness refers to the rigor or adequacy of an inquiry. Credibility, a concept parallel to the positivistic term *internal validity*, assesses an inquiry's "truth value." Transferability, parallel to the positivistic terms *external validity and generalizability*, is the degree to which an investigator forms working hypotheses that may be transferred from one context to another depending on the "fit" between settings. Dependability, parallel to the conventional paradigm's *reliability*, concerns factors that insure the stability of data over time. And confirmability, parallel to the positivistic criterion of *objectivity*, assures that inquiry data, interpretations, and outcomes are rooted in the context from which they came. The strategies implemented to insure trustworthiness in this study were: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, and member checks (credibility); thick description (transferability); an audit trail and dependability audit (dependability); and investigator reflexivity, dependability audit, and confirmability audit (confirmability) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

THEMES AND PATTERNS

Several themes and patterns related to organizational dynamics were identified that affect the loyalty between student affairs leaders and followers at the four case study sites.

Organizational Structure

An institution's organizational structure affected the extent to which loyalty could thrive. The flatter the structure, the more loyalty professed upward and downward in the bureaucratic organizational chart, among leaders and followers alike. A horizontal structure may create more opportunities for member interaction and more evenly distribute status. One male college president, from a private institution where leaders and followers had created an organizational ethos of loyalty by professing it to one another, described it best:

I want to come to consensus ... a humanistic approach in a hierarchical structure. It is worth the time and involvement to pull it off. I do not see myself as a CEO, but I want to see myself in the business of persuasion and not coercion.... A persuader will have the team moving forward in accomplishing accepted goals.

Leaders who worked in flat organizational structures also practiced team

building through joint decision-making about policies affecting their area.

Conversely, organizations with the most layers of bureaucracy professed less loyalty. Student affairs organizations where communication flows upward and back down, never laterally or skipping levels, inhibited members from dealing directly with each other. Contact with others in a flat organizational structure encourages more direct communication and the opportunity to develop trust. Interaction is the chief nutrient of relationships; as trust grows, loyalty blossoms.

Organizational Mission and Goals

Shared leader and follower belief in the organizational mission and goals was paramount in creating an environment where loyalty flourishes. Institutions with a clearly defined and commonly understood philosophy and mission produced the highest incidence of loyalty. As if examining the lid before opening the box to determine its contents, a female department head at a medium-size, land-grant institution reflected:

Loyalty in an organizational setting is people [at an institution] who share the overall goals and mission and are in support of the same kinds of values. I respect the university and care about enhancing the environment here. I also believe in the mission statement. I am loyal to the values embedded in the goals of higher education. Interpersonal loyalty is the by-product of my value system.

Subordinates gained ownership of the institutional mission by actively participating in defining the mission, philosophy, and goals of the student affairs division. The process of reaching consensus produced organizational members who ultimately supported what they helped to create. On the other hand, little loyalty was evident at the medium-size, private institution in an urban area, where a purpose was not clearly defined and where the stated goals focused on specific quantitative outcomes, few of which related directly to learning in or out of the classroom. Not insignificantly, this institution was also in a financial crisis that produced feelings of personal insecurity among student affairs members.

Professional Expectation

Loyal behavior was an unwritten professional expectation of key players. Although not formally stated in a job description, loyalty to leaders and followers was expressed verbally as an expectation or responsibility of a position. One follower emphasized mutual rights and expectations based on a leader's position:

A certain amount of loyalty is positional loyalty. I respect [the SSAO'S] right to be in the job. By being in that position she has earned my acceptance. She also has the right to expect certain things out of me.

Follower loyalty to a leader was an expected, but rarely spoken, professional commitment. One SSAO's superior, who holds power over academic and student affairs, described several instances of his loyalty to the SSAO.

He spoke of loyalty to his subordinate as a duty and expectation of his position, but demanded the obligation be reciprocated. This leader suggested any other type of behavior would be destructive to the organization:

It is expected that I will be loyal to [the SSAO] and enhance the rapport that we have together. To be otherwise, the organization loses. I owe as much loyalty to [the SSAO] as she owes to me. I win back her up in her decisions because she is closer to the action. When she makes a decision, I have an obligation to support her.

On the other hand, leader loyalty to follower was often contingent on follower behavior or attitude, or on leader concern for meeting follower needs. Oddly, a clearly articulated message of expected loyal behavior between leader and follower never emerged. Motives for follower loyalty to leader were formed by an unwritten agreement of duty and obligation, or by the verbalized expectations of the superior. Leader motives for loyalty to follower were based, in part, on trust in subordinate competence.

Organizational Behavior

There were a number of ways leaders and followers perceived behaviors as a sign of loyalty. Most centered on job responsibilities or ethical professional practice. One SSAO believed, for instance, that he showed signs of loyalty to a subordinate by granting her a leave of absence. In regard to ethical professional practice, another SSAO saw loyalty to a superior manifested in her not supporting gossip about top level administrators.

Conversely, several subordinates demonstrated loyalty by keeping the SSAO informed. Other followers expressed loyalty to leaders in a multitude of job-related ways: by attending regularly scheduled staff meetings on time, by completing quality work in timely fashion, by participating in professional association activity, by participating willingly in committee assignments, and by interacting with students in a professional manner.

Decision-making

Followers who had the opportunity to voice opinions about their personal and professional work lives professed more loyalty to leaders than those who did not. Subordinates also perceived superiors who give them such opportunity as exhibiting loyalty to them. This sentiment was strongest among individuals from institutions more closely aligned with participatory decision-making through consensus, or at least debate. One male department head who praised his leader's style, painted the following picture of decision-making in the student affairs division:

[The SSAO] acts from a hands-on perspective. She will gather people and get them to voice their opinion and give their perspective.... She is thoroughly involving. She is involved in our decision-making, but wants to be informed of the facts. She encourages decision-making as a group. When needed, she can act with wit and make decisions without debating or pretending.

A subordinate at an institution where autocratic decision-making was dominant expressed a desire to voice opinions in policy matters:

Loyalty is willingness and openness to feedback and inviting input. It makes me angry when someone makes a decision that affects me that I have no say in. I want to have a sense of control, commitment, and challenge. I do not have to "win" them all, but I want people to be democratic with me.

Members deemed the ability to verbalize opinions important for keeping dignity and self-confidence high. Within autocratic organizations, loyalty was more likely professed if followers believed their voice was being accurately and persuasively articulated to institutional decision-makers. In return for advocacy, subordinates supported and defended superiors' decisions. One male department head offered insight into his demonstrations of loyal behavior:

It does not change my relationship with (the SSAO) when she overrules me. When I have a disagreement with [her] I will try to persuade her, but when I walk out of the room, I will carry out any decision that is made. Disagreement is healthy in organizations. I want people who work with me to tell me to my face why they disagree and to be open and honest. I want a win/win instead of a compromise, because both departments lose in a compromise situation. However, you must always be supportive of decisions made.

Organizational Power

Power given to or taken by institutional leaders affected expressed loyalty in relationships. Leaders with the power to make decisions affecting resource distribution and policy in student affairs were likely to have followers who expressed loyalty. Loyalty was expressed often, for example, by subordinates at the institution where the SSAO had power to raise salaries. When asked to give the bases for subordinate loyalty to the SSAO, one male department head at this institution responded with heartfelt respect for competence, power, and values:

My loyalty to [the SSAO] is based on appreciation of her knowledge, values, power, and sense of transcendence. She knows what needs to be done in the program and is moving toward global consciousness. She knows that she has power and exercises it. She keeps that power moving in a direction that gains rights of the people [her staff] and tries to help them grow through the enrichment process. She has the knowledge base in things like the budget, which she does not exploit for her own self-interest. She generally has the care of the people who work under her in mind.

In contrast, loyalty was expressed only sporadically at the institution where the SSAO had no power to affect subordinate pay, and lack of trust permeated the organizational climate. Furthermore, several untrusting subordinates at this institution believed the SSAO used students as his primary source of power to undermine the authority of department heads:

If [the SSAO] wants to communicate with a certain group of students he will bypass department heads and go straight to the students. He uses students as a main source of power when in

reality there is little power there. He usually will disclose confidential information given to him by students. He will mask a situation by telling part of the story but not the rest ... a technique used in mystery.

Loyalty to Institution

Loyalty to the institution could take precedence over that to an individual. In some situations, the desires of an individual could not supersede institutional goals. For example, the unit of one male department head, at an institution where loyalty to the institution, superiors, and subordinates was regularly professed, was being audited to learn if it would be more organizationally effective to have the unit report to another senior administrator. Expressing a desire to remain in the student affairs division because of its philosophy, this subordinate conceded that if it were deemed best for his unit to be a component of another division, he would willingly comply.

At an institution where little or no loyalty to superiors or subordinates was professed, several department heads spoke of loyalty to the institution as more important than to the SSAO. Some connected loyal sentiment directly to institutional goals, while others tied it to a specific student affairs unit. One adamant subordinate described her conflicting loyalties:

My first loyalty is to the institution. I believe that this loyalty always happens in the context of a subunit. I identify more strongly with the philosophy and tenure of the institution than with student affairs. For example, when I first came here I reported to academic affairs. Eventually, all of the [SSAO's institutional peers] came and asked me how I felt about them, each embracing a move for me to report to them. I did not want to report to my supervisor [the SSAO], but I knew it would be the best for the institution.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Several implications of this study are relevant to leaders in student affairs. First, organizational structure may affect the extent to which loyalty can be fostered. Practitioners who want to create a climate where loyalty grows must design organizational structures that allow followers to voice their opinions about policies affecting them. This research suggests that flat organizational structures are better suited to this end. Many who participated in the study asked only that their "voice" be respected and considered when making organizational decisions; others wanted a chance to directly influence policy-makers at the pinnacle of the organization. Leaders and followers should examine the evidence suggesting that flat organizational charts and subordinate influence in decision-making build loyal relationships.

Second, loyalty is an unwritten (and often unspoken) expectation of organizational players in key administrative roles. Relationships and productivity are enhanced when organizational members share expectations with one another. Leaders and followers can improve their relationships by discussing and documenting expectations of loyalty.

Third, power given or taken by institutional leaders may affect loyalty in organizational relationships. SSAOs who use the legitimate power of their

positions to reward subordinates are likely, in turn, to be rewarded with loyalty. Yet, other bases of power appear to be connected to loyalty as well. For example, leaders and followers perceived to be professionally competent (expert power) gain each other's respect, thereby producing loyal dyads.

Fourth, loyalty to the institution, often expressed through shared institutional mission and goals, must supersede loyalty to organizational members in a student affairs setting. Although context might determine the appropriate loyal benefactors, student affairs administrators must examine manifestations of their loyalty and the loyalty of others to determine when conflicts occur with the mission and goals of the institution.

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