

Public Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which Social Network Analysis (SNA) could inform leadership capacity by making explicit often hidden social networks that exist within organizations. SNA is a relatively new analytical tool and, to date, little used in the educational domain. Although it provides a quantitative means to examine social networks, its true benefits lie in the conversations it sparks when those networks are visualized and presented to those who inhabit them.

The study was undertaken in three phases within a small, Midwestern school district. In the first phase, a face-to-face interview was conducted with the superintendent. The same set of questions posed to the superintendent was then asked of the districts senior leaders, comprised of the deputy and assistant superintendents, and building administrators (principals). The second phase comprised of two surveys: a SNA survey and Lambert's (2003) Leadership Capacity School Survey, administered to the senior leaders as well as their administrative assistants (N=15). The final phase was a group interview with the senior leaders (superintendent, deputy and assistant superintendent, and principals) in which the results of the two surveys were presented in visual form and used to guide discussion and discovery.

The data from these various sources were tabulated and analyzed, yielding a series of network visualizations and six themes. The first two themes emerged from the network visualizations produced by the Organizational Risk Analyzer (ORA) software application employed to conduct the SNA. They included the fact that individuals tended to form cliques with their own kind, based largely on role or function; and that individuals and sub-groups tended to be fragmented or isolated. The other four themes emerged in oppositional terms and included: vision versus managed programs; collaboration versus isolation and fragmentation; trust versus suspicion and avoidance; transparency versus opacity and guardedness.

From these themes were identified four findings. The first was that hierarchical or formal structures continue to hold sway. The second was that "birds of a feather" do indeed flock together. The third was that collaboration, trust, and transparency are inter-dependent and undergird capacity. The fourth was that social networks are the organization, making SNA an essential diagnostic and decision-making tool.

The findings led to a number of implications for practice, which were framed by Information Age imperatives arising from the literature. Also discussed were implications for future research, which are immense.