

Bringing personal values to work

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Abstract

This paper addresses the possible tension between organisational values and personal values at work. In particular this paper reflects on findings from a current research project around the issue of principals' leadership in the context of the Catholic school. We came to this research focus on the understanding that the issue of the leadership role of the principal is increasingly problematic. Church documents, diocesan policy and specific role descriptions expect that the principal will take responsibility for leadership in the Catholic school. However, the *second* half of the twentieth century has witnessed a growing secularism within western society, resulting in a "degree of ambivalence and neglect" (King & Crowther, 2004, p.83) about the place of religion in the organization (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). In this context, individuals may find a disparity between their personal values and those of the organisation. Thus individuals may experience personal conflict and present as "split personalities" (Alford & Naughton, 2001, p.7). In our current research, the findings to date suggest that principals recognise the challenge of aligning personal values and organisational values at work. They are concerned about the next generation of leaders in Catholic schools who, they suggest, may experience heightened tension between their personal values and those of the organisation. As a way forward these principals recommend an intentional role making process, supported by opportunities for faith leadership formation.

Keywords: values, leadership, secular, spirituality, formation, disparity, role-making, symbolic interactionism.

Introduction

This paper addresses the possible tension between organisational values and personal values at work. In particular it reflects on findings from current research around the issue of principals' faith leadership in the context of the Catholic school (Neidhart & Lamb, 2010; 2011). Church documents, diocesan policy and specific role descriptions expect that the principal will take responsibility for faith leadership in the Catholic school. However, researchers have identified the challenge of faith leadership in

Catholic schools and the need for further research (Davison, 2006; McEvoy, 2006; Thompson, 2010). It seems that there are more questions than answers in respect to the faith leadership dimension of the principal's role. What does faith leadership look like in Catholic schools? What factors enable and inhibit its exercise? Who is responsible for faith leadership in Catholic schools? What is the relationship between the school principal and the parish priest (in primary schools) in respect to faith leadership in Catholic schools? Such questions point to the fact that we do not yet have a clear understanding of *what* faith leadership is, or *how* to go about it in the context of the Catholic school.

Literature Review

The tension between personal values and organisational values with respect to the faith leadership role of the principal is hardly surprising given the rise of secularism in western society. The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a growing secularism within western society resulting in a "degree of ambivalence and neglect" (King & Crowther, 2004, p.83) about the place of religion in the organisation (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). However, studies also show an increased interest in spirituality (rather than religion) in the workplace (Fry, 2003; Lips-Wiersma, 2004). It seems that, with increasing alienation in society and the pressures of constant change, human beings still "seek connectivity and meaning in all facets of life, including the organisations in which they work" (Dent, Higgins & Wharff, 2005, p. 630).

This interest in spirituality in the workplace highlights a definitional split between notions of spirituality and religion within the literature (King & Crowther, 2004). In short, religion is defined as, "an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols... Spirituality is the personal quest for answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to, or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formulation of community" (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001, p.18). Here religion is generally viewed as inherently negative and described in terms such as "narrow... prescriptive... dogmatic... restrictive... closed... exclusive" (Mitroff & Denton, 1999, p. 40). At the same time, spirituality makes a positive contribution to human development by focusing attention on connectivity and personal meaning making within community (Dent, Higgins & Wharff, 2005).

Of particular interest to this research, Alford and Naughton (2001) point to the secularisation of society, and note that:

...the most difficult challenges that those religiously guided organisations face is to express their faith in the workplace in a way that is both forthright and specific without being rigid or exclusive. Christian managers and entrepreneurs struggle over how to preserve the sources of their inspiration as their organizations acquire employees, partners, shareholders, suppliers and customers, who are not committed to that faith, even if they can respect it (p.27).

In this context, individuals may find a disparity between their personal values and those of the organisation. To manage this disparity, individuals separate their private and working selves resulting in “split personalities” (p.7).

The challenge of conflicting values at work is further explored within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 2002; Hewitt, 2003; Charon, 2004). This theoretical framework asserts that role behaviour is more than meeting the expectations of others. It is, in fact, the product of a “role making process” (Stryker, 2002, p.79). Traditionally, roles were deemed to be:

...sets of expectations – or a script – that tells the individual what to do. The fact is that roles are fluid, vague and contradictory. Actors shape their own roles to an extent, to meet their own goals. Roles are thus social objects that we learn in interaction and alter according to our definition of the situation. (Charon, 2004, p.168)

This understanding, in turn, introduces the related concepts of “role commitment” (Stryker, 2003, p.60-62), “role conflict” (p.73) and “role strain” (p.76). The concept of role commitment represents the degree of ‘fit’ between the individual’s goals in the workplace. Role conflict, on the other hand, occurs when the individual’s goals are at odds with others in a social situation. The role conflict becomes role strain, as the role conflict experienced by individuals begins to affect the underlying stability of the organisation, as more and more people do not accept organisational norms.

Thus a role is described as “a set of rules...governed by negotiation” (Charon, 2004, p.168) and symbolic interactionists recommend a role making process that is:

... a self-conscious activity. In order to make an adequate performance – one that others can interpret as appropriate, that will be acceptable to the one that is making it – there must be a consciousness of self. The person must be aware of his or her

performance in the making so that it can be adjusted to suit personal goals, the demands of the situation, and the expectations of others. (Hewitt, 2003, p.69)

Thus described this role making process relies on the individual being both self-reflective and interactive with others; “the person imaginatively occupies the role of another and looks at self and the situation from that vantage point in order to engage in role making” (Stryker, 2002, p.65). This recognition of the importance of self-reflection and social interaction focuses attention on the social structures that serve to enable or inhibit self-reflection and social interaction. The presence of role conflict definitely suggests the need to situate the role making process within the larger context of supportive social structures that encourage both self-reflection and social interaction.

This literature seems to explain the challenge facing principals as faith leaders in Catholic schools. Leadership in terms of a Christian religious tradition, such as Catholicism, would require a wholehearted commitment to Catholic beliefs, values and practices (Borg, 2004) that may be at odds with personal beliefs, values and practices. Today’s principals are contemporary people and ‘products’ of their time and place in history. Consequently, they may come to the task of faith leadership somewhat suspicious of religion, as they may have experienced its “narrow... prescriptive... dogmatic... restrictive... closed... exclusive...” side (Mitroff & Denton, 1999, p. 40). Perhaps they are unable to find support within a religious tradition for the creation of a vision, or sense of calling, or for the establishment of a culture based on service and altruistic love. Does the expectation of faith leadership lead to principals to present as “split personalities” (Alford & Naughton, 2001, p.7)? Is there “role conflict” (Stryker, 2003, p.73) for individuals, and “role strain” (p.76) within the organisation? Do social structures enable or inhibit the role making process?

Mindful of these questions, we sought the principals’ perspectives on the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools and have, to date, conducted two research projects around the issue of the faith leadership role of the principal (Neidhart & Lamb, 2010; 2011). The first project collected data from principals working in Catholic primary schools in a rural diocese in Queensland. In the current project we have moved interstate to Victoria and extended the original research by including secondary principals as well in another rural diocese. We came to this research on the understanding that the concept of the Catholic school as a ‘faith community’ itself is contested and that the leadership role of the principal is also evolving. However, in the

course of this research we have come to appreciate that the problems around the principal's faith leadership role are, at least in part, due to difficulties in aligning organisational values with personal values. The current research project, therefore, is designed to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the possible tension between personal values and organisational values at work.

Research Design

The current study is situated within the theoretical framework of “symbolic interactionism” (Charon, 2001). This theoretical framework allows the researcher to focus on the perspective of key ‘actors’ in social situations. Moreover, symbolic interactionism helps to explain the role making process by assuming that roles are not fixed but constantly negotiated as the self and society interact (Stryker, 2003). In this study, the key actors were deemed to be principals and the social situation or society was the Catholic primary and secondary school.

This study involved two stages of data collection, analysis and interpretation: “exploration” and “inspection” (Charon, 2004, p.208). Stage One, the exploration stage, seeks an initial understanding of the phenomenon of the principal's faith leadership role in Catholic schools. The data collection used at this stage was via a three part online questionnaire (LimeSurvey n.d.) completed by 18 principals. This stage facilitated the identification of key issues for a more comprehensive investigation undertaken in the second stage, the inspection stage. In this stage individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 11 principals.

The challenge of faith leadership

In our research so far the principals have voiced their commitment to their faith leadership role. They understood that they could never “opt out” of their faith leadership responsibilities and faith leadership could never be totally delegated to the Religious Education Coordinator/Head of Religious Education, or a Director of Faith and Mission. At the same time, they were aware of the challenge of faith leadership in an increasingly secularised society. It can no longer be assumed that school families and staff are “connected” to the parish. A secondary principal repeated the comment of a parent about the school “being a great school, if we could only put the Catholic thing aside”. Staff and parents are more and more “disengaged from parish life” and “there is a growing gulf between the school community and the parish community”.

Despite the challenge, these principals were able to give examples of a number of faith leadership behaviours. Such behaviours include being committed to the development of a personal faith, witnessing gospel values and Catholic teaching, leading school liturgy and prayer, supporting the religious education programme and, organizing faith formation opportunities for staff. It is interesting to note that here the principals gave particular emphasis to their parish involvement. For these principals, those senior leaders in Catholic schools who were “not necessarily attached to mass attendance” and “may only have professional reasons for going to mass” [in the parish], could never be effective faith leaders, as parish involvement was intrinsic to their faith leadership role.

Noting this list of leadership behaviours, we, as researchers, were keen to discover whether the principals were motivated by employer expectations, or whether these behaviours were founded on deeply held personal values. Whilst appreciating the difficulty of identifying the private domain of motivations, beliefs and values, further conversations with the principals suggests that employer expectations were not the sole motivating force for the principals’ faith leadership. It seems that the principal’s faith leadership role was not clearly articulated in role statements and they agreed with a colleagues’ claim that the faith leadership role remains a “puzzle”. Moreover, the faith leadership dimension was not always at the forefront of the principals’ appraisal process; “it really depends on the process and the panel”. Such comments suggest that these principals saw their faith leadership flowing out of their “vocation”, or “ministry” as Catholic educators. One principal argued that faith leadership is “too hard to turn off”, as it flows out of the “core of who you are”. Moreover, individual and organisational success and wellbeing depends on their “personal [faith] commitments and professional life [as a faith leader] must come together”.

At the same time, it should be noted the principals did not fully subscribe to all the teachings of the Church and that there was “some angst” and talk about “staying under the radar”. They were mostly able to stay “true” to what they considered to be the “core teachings of the Catholic church”. For these principals witness to Gospel values demonstrated a “deep commitment to the Catholic faith”. However, they also believed that, beyond this personal witness to the Gospel, the principal as faith leader must also be able to “articulate” a personal faith position. Moreover, they needed to “give more time to faith leadership” and initiate more “conversation about faith”, or “open up the

faith topic” with the various members of the school community. Reflecting on their experience of such conversations, the principals noted that parents and staff were not necessarily “cynical” about religion or anti-Catholicism, rather that they “just don’t know” and that, therefore, there is a growing need for “Catholicism 101”, or “Catholicism for Dummies”.

Reflecting on their success as faith leaders, the principals believed that they were able to witness to the organisational values of the Catholic Church both in their personal and professional lives. They were less confident, however, in articulating a personal faith position and explaining the motivations and values that underpin their decision-making. For these principals “talking about a personal faith is challenging and confronting”. They believed that most of their colleague principals would find it difficult to provide a theological /spiritual explanation of the nature and purpose of the Catholic school, or to write a vision/mission statement. Moreover, they often felt “inadequate about their theological study” and “questioned their knowledge base”. Consequently, they were open to professional development opportunities that would deepen their theological and spiritual knowledge.

Given these perspectives, the conversation during each of the interviews turned to the future. At this point, the principals worried that “the next generation” of school leaders may not have the capabilities to engage in faith leadership. For example, “even Religious Education teachers are unsure of Catholic identity [and find it difficult to] balance the inclusive and the exclusive [nature of the Catholic school]”. In addition, “staff are increasingly less confident about leading staff prayer” as evidenced in their choice of “secular orientated reflections over prayers”. They also “seem reluctant to invest in faith study”, as they are not necessarily committed to staying in Catholic schools. More often than not they feel they do not need to participate in parish life. Thus, in looking to the future, both primary and secondary principals expressed anxiety about the ability and/or willingness of the next generation of leaders to carry on the ministry of faith leadership in schools. As a way forward, they regard ongoing leadership formation as urgent and essential. They, therefore, recommended that “the Diocese needs to come into formation in a big way” and that faith leadership development for principals and teachers should be strategic and relevant to the individual’s needs and circumstances. Furthermore, these programmes should involve “reading”, “conversation”, “networking” and “personal reflection”.

Discussion

Reflecting on these perspectives regarding the challenge of faith leadership, it seems that the majority of principals understand faith leadership to be integral to their role as principal in a Catholic school. Our research findings suggest a high degree of “role commitment” (Stryker, 2003, p.60-62) to the task of faith leadership. At the same time, principals are well aware of the challenge of faith leadership in the secular society, where there is a “degree of ambivalence and neglect” (King & Crowther, 2004, p.83). Although the principals in this study experienced some “angst” in respect to aligning personal and organisational values in this context, Alford and Naughton’s (2001) notion of “split personalities” (p.7) did not seem to be a factor in respect to the challenge of faith leadership. These principals were confident about appropriate faith leadership behaviours and saw their faith leadership flowing out of their “vocation”, or “ministry” as Catholic educators. As one principal argued, faith leadership is “too hard to turn off”, as it flows out of the “core of who you are”.

Intrigued by this finding, as researchers we focussed on how these principals went about aligning personal and organisational values at work. Firstly, we found that the principals have personal reservations about some of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Secondly, they saw the need to discern the “core teachings of the Catholic Church” and try to “give witness to Christian values”. Finally, they tried to witness through their behaviour to their faith commitment and to look for opportunities to initiate faith conversations with others to appreciate “the gospel message through the Catholic tradition”. In agreement with the symbolic interactionist conceptualisation of role identity, they appreciate that their role is not fixed, but rather “governed by negotiation” (Charon, 2004, p.168). They saw themselves employing a “role making process” (Stryker, 2002, p.65) that was a “self-conscious activity, in which the person must be aware of his or her performance in the making so that it can be adjusted to suit personal goals, the demands of the situation, and the expectations of others” (Hewitt, 2003, p.69).

In describing this role making process, it is interesting to note that principals were concerned that they lacked the religious knowledge to articulate a personal faith position and explain the motivations and values that underpin their decision-making. Moreover, they were concerned that the next generation of leaders in Catholic schools were ill-prepared to take on the challenge of faith leadership. Therefore, to support the

role making process, they recommended strategic and relevant programmes of leadership formation for principals and teachers that situated professional development within enabling social structures of self-reflection and social interaction.

A way forward

This paper has drawn on the findings of our current research project, which seeks to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of the faith leadership role of principals in primary and secondary schools. Consistent with the theme of the current conference, this paper focuses on the challenge of aligning personal and organisational values at work, by drawing on relevant scholarly literature, as well as on the perspectives of principals themselves. We conclude this paper by offering a new model for values alignment (Figure 1) in support of faith leadership in the Catholic school.

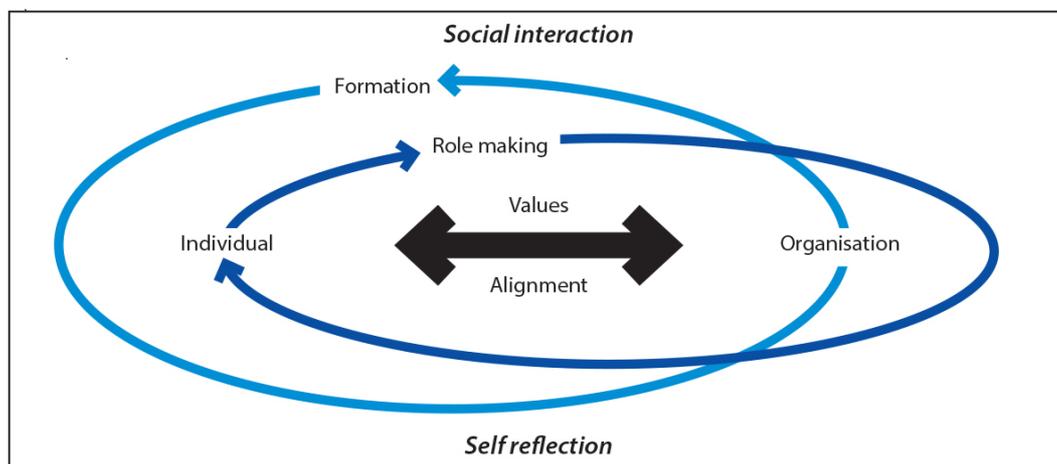


Figure 1. Values alignment in support of faith leadership in Catholic schools

In this model the alignment of personal and organisational values lies at the core of faith leadership formation. Here it is assumed that given the growing secularisation of society, it is more than likely that individuals working in Catholic schools will experience “role conflict” (Stryker, 2003, p.73) to the point of presenting as “split personalities” (Alford & Naughton, 2001, p.7) at work. Indeed the role conflict may be such that there will be “role strain” (Stryker, 2003, p.76), and the very stability of the organisation may be threatened, as fewer people respect organisational norms. Thus the alignment of personal and organisational values is deemed to be crucial both for individual wellbeing and organisational sustainability. It is also assumed within this model that the individual’s role is not fixed, but open to negotiation. This negotiation requires the individual to initiate an intentional role making process. This role making

is a self-conscious activity in which the individual adjusts performance to suit personal goals, the demands of the situation, and the expectations of others. A programme of faith leadership formation supports such a role making process. This formation programme is developed within the organisation. The curriculum would be relevant to the individual's learning needs and strategic in the sense of addressing the demands of the situation and meeting the expectations of others. Both the individual's role making process and the formation programme would, in turn, be situated within social structures that encourage self-reflection as well as social interaction.

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