Chapter 9
Distributed Leadership: Democracy or Delivery?

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Introduction

In the face of mounting evidence that top-down, micro-managed educational change models have failed to enhance student achievement over time, alternative models of lateral and distributed leadership, cross-school networks and professional learning communities are now being promoted as ways to harness the energy, motivation and professional learning of teachers and school leaders to secure sustainable innovation and improvement. In contrast to technocratic emphases imported from the corporate world on performance targets, line management, and delivery systems, emerging models of distributed leadership, networks and communities of practice regard organizations more as “living systems” or complex, evolutionary, “networks” that are much less amenable to top-down regulation.

This chapter discusses the nature and benefits of lateral approaches to educational change, especially in the form of distributed leadership, that treat schools, localities, states, or nations, as “living systems” interconnected by mutual influence. Through a conceptual discussion of the interrelated ideas of living systems, communities of practice and networks, the chapter underlines how, within this conception, distributed leadership operates as a network of strong cells organized through cohesive diversity and emergent development rather than mechanical alignment and predictable delivery. However, more deeply and more critically, the chapter also investigates whether, in practice, these lateral strategies are being used to extend democratic public and professional involvement in developing the goals and purposes of education or whether they are being primarily used as motivational devices to re-energize a dispirited profession into producing more effective and enthusiastic delivery of imposed government performance targets?

Research examples from England, North America, and Finland are used to underscore our argument.

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Three Concepts

Sustainable improvement in organizations, like sustainable improvement in bodily health or protected ecosystems, does not occur through singular strategies, emphasizing only one crop or health solution. Rather, it is the interaction of these elements in complex and holistic systems that move organizations and environments forward. Three interrelated concepts articulate the importance of this argument: living systems, communities of practice and networks.

Living Systems

All living systems, natural and human, possess two qualities. First, they foster creativity, imagination, and innovation. Learning and growth are inherent in all living systems and the appearance of a qualitatively new order of things emerges with the creation of meaningful novelty in the environment. This novelty may be an insightful remark or the learning and breakthrough that come from interdisciplinary or cross-cultural contact, or the development of new government policy. Such living systems can be spontaneous or emerge by design.

Second, living systems are self-organizing networks of communication. Schools, districts, and indeed nations are organized into multiple communities of practice such as civil rights or environmental movements that can interconnect to move society forward, or that can conversely join together to inhibit change or block new directions.

Like a web of interconnected communities, each network has an essential skeletal structure of rules and regulations that frames relationships among people and tasks, distributes political power, and guides daily practice. It is these arrangements that eventually appear in or disappear from classroom seating plans, policy documents, organizational charts, written contracts, and budgets. These are the structures, forms, and functions designed by policy makers, leaders, and teachers to provide stability, order and direction in organizations such as schools. This ability to design is a solely human function.

In nature, most change occurs through emergence, evolution, and the survival of the fittest. Not all evolution is universally benign, however, as farmers whose fields have been devastated by locusts will testify. Human design therefore seeks to protect society from the destructive forces that also afflict nature by providing purpose, meaning, structure, and cohesion. Taken too far, however, human design can overwhelm and stifle emergence within organizational and natural ecosystems as global warming, holocausts, technologies of torture and insensitive bureaucracies, all illustrate. It is the informal interconnections and interrelationships among people that cut across and intersect with an organization’s formal structures, “the fluid and fluctuating networks of communication” that give web-like organizations and communities their “aliveness.”

The aliveness of an organization – its flexibility, creative potential, and learning capability – resides in its informal “communities of practice”. The formal parts of an organization may