



## DONALD TRUMP AS A CULTURAL LEADER: NAVIGATING THE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP TRAITS OF A U.S. PRESIDENT

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### ABSTRACT

Since Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president in 2015, Americans knew that he would be a different kind of president. Most individuals would agree that, on the surface, President Trump's leadership style is unorthodox and unfamiliar to the political norms. However, as a leader of a major nation, his leadership style is easily critiqued and under constant scrutiny. Essential to campus leadership is the establishment and development of a strong culture. This article examines the important aspect of cultural leadership through the lens of how a campus principal would promote and manage culture on their campus. Simply put: What if Donald Trump was a campus principal? How his teachers and students respond to the culture he had built in his administration?

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### INTRODUCTION

Leadership. While a broad term, the concept has garnered an extensive body of research. There are numerous leadership styles and theories (Bryman, 1992; Conger & Kanungo, 1994; Den Hartog, Van Muijen, & Koopman, 1994; House & Howell, 1992; Engen, Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001). Scholars who study leadership theory have spent countless hours analyzing leaders – from Hannibal to Hitler – to identify their styles of leadership and establish models to teach future aspiring leaders. Educational leadership is similar. With an extensive body of research, scholars seek to identify the traits necessary to manage and lead schools. Colleges and universities have developed graduate schools and degrees around these theories, which are designed to train leaders to manage schools and districts. Since there are a variety of leadership theories that a person can subscribe to, we know that leadership can be learned (Doh, 2003). No, leadership is not for everyone; and yes, some people are "born leaders." However, whether you are President of the United States or principal of your local high school, these are positions that require an individual to practice and demonstrate leadership qualities.

It has been very clear since Donald Trump announced his campaign for President of the United States that he was going to be a different kind of leader. Trump aired these same sentiments in an interview with the Associated Press in April stating plainly, "It's a different kind of presidency" (Pace, 2017). Senator Mitch McConnell made a similar statement to the *Washington Post*, "I say it with a smile on my face: He's a different kind of president" (Sullivan & Kane, 2017). What we have seen over the course of his first nine months in office has been unorthodox, as promised, and has made for interesting news and social media fodder. Nonetheless, as we watch the President serve the country in this very important leadership role, it is important to examine why President Trump and others consider him to be so different in terms of presidential leadership. As we watch the Trump presidency evolve and the public becomes acquainted with his leadership style, it's interesting to view this presidency through the lens of an educational leader. What if Donald Trump wanted to be a campus principal? What if he ran a high school? How would a professor of educational leadership coach him if he were taking graduate level courses on educational leadership?

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this analysis, I will use the Advancing Educational Leadership (AEL) Framework (Texas Education Agency,

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2015) to analyze Donald Trump from the perspective of an educational leader. The AEL framework is a certificate program issued to aspiring leaders seeking principal certification in Texas. The framework is used to train campus leaders on research-based concepts found in effective educational leaders. This series will look at each of the themes of the AEL framework, which include Creating a Positive School Culture, Establishing and Sustaining Vision, Mission, and Goals, Developing Self and Others, Improving Instruction, and Managing Data and Processes (Texas Education Agency, 2015). For this installment in the series, we will look at the AEL theme *Creating a Positive Culture*. This article will analyze the leadership traits of President Trump as they pertain to serving as a campus leader instead of leader of the free world. Clearly, running the United States of America has significant and profound differences from running a school, so the focus will be solely on leadership traits and qualities. There will be no attempt to analyze his day-to-day decisions, political speeches, or controversies unless directly attributable to a chief leadership trait. Since President Trump is not managing a school, and therefore, does not improve instruction or have a school to create a culture within, we will focus and analyze leadership traits required for campus leadership and not a suggestion that Donald Trump subscribe to a particular leadership model. For instruction, we can review the constitutional duties of the president as being an instructional leader is the primary function of a campus principal. For school culture, we will analyze reported White House culture as well and climate, i.e. how the country feels about President Trump to this point by looking at various approval polls, opinions on his policies, and his attention to the pulse of the entire nation. In essence, we will review and analyze Principal Donald Trump as he takes over campus leadership after Principal Barack Obama left our hypothetical campus. When you think of great leaders in history, I am sure you have a person that comes to mind who espouses traits that you value. A quick Google search of leadership traits will reveal descriptors such as focus, confidence, transparency, integrity, honesty, and creativity. These are traits that cannot be statistically quantified, but are sought in our leaders. Not every person needs to have these traits to be a leader, but they are truly valuable when used as tools to lead an organization. I will explore these concepts throughout the series as well.

### Creating a Positive (School) Culture

Researchers Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) state that there are building blocks required to build a school culture. These blocks represent broad definitions for leaders to use when establishing both a positive climate and culture on a school campus. These building blocks include mission and vision, values and beliefs, norms, roles, heroes, and routines. A strong, positive culture serves several beneficial functions, including fostering productivity, supporting successful change, building commitment, and amplifying the motivation of your staff (Deal & Peterson, 2009; AEL, 2015). New leaders should work to build and create their own specified culture, but keeping in mind that culture will become an identity and ultimately the personality of the group that you lead. Culture defines who you are, how people see you, and represents how things are done at a school. Many scholars of educational leadership report how they can walk into a school and “feel” the difference between a great culture and poor culture. It permeates the school climate from the students to the teachers to the parents and even the community. One significant theme

of building a positive culture is establishing norms. Norms represent essentially “the way we do things around here” (Texas Education Agency, 2015) and help support how each member of the team will treat each other in times of conflict, collaboration, negotiation, and support. Think of norms as a social contract we keep with one another to ensure that our entire organization is on the right track. New leaders should establish norms at the beginning of their tenure through collaboration with their staff and work to establish these norms throughout all aspects of the school.

As a campus leader, Donald Trump should work to establish a set of norms for not only his White House Staff, but also in his leadership of the country. It has been reported by *The Week* that Donald Trump leads a chaotic White House that “enables factionalism by playing rivals against each other, rewards the most obsequious surrogates regardless of competence, and punishes anyone who inconveniences him with any sort of principled independence” (Fisher, 2017). Politico has reported on issues that have somehow “leaked” from members of the White House staff resulting in finger pointing and blame from high level staff members (Woellert, 2017). Former White House Communications Director, Anthony Scaramucci once compared his relationship with former White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus to the “mythical sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the latter of whom was murdered by the former” (Fisher, 2017). Donald Trump appears to be creating a culture where people aren’t really sure how they fit in the organization fight to establish their opinions or gain approval from the president. A clear set of norms would help to support his staff and enable people to do the jobs they were brought on staff to perform. Another significant example of the cultural dysfunction displayed from the Trump White House is the recent reports of Donald Trump’s relationship with the Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The Attorney General is an appointed position within the executive branch that is designated as the chief law enforcement officer and lawyer for the country. In addition, the Attorney General serves on the president’s cabinet and advises the president “in carrying out his duties on legal and law enforcement issues” (Coble, 2015).

It’s not uncommon for leaders to disagree with the people that work for them and these disagreements can often come with highly emotional, yet professional conversations. However, the job of any great leader is to grow and support the people around them (Leithwood, Kenneth, and Jantzi, 2005). What is not common is to berate and embarrass someone who works for you despite a disagreement. According to a New York Times article, Attorney General Sessions engaged in a debate with the president regarding a decision Sessions had made related to an ongoing investigation. President Trump felt that decision created a situation whereby President Trump lost control over the inquiry and chose to insult Sessions calling him “disloyal” (Schmidt & Haberman, 2017). Sessions told other staff members that he felt that the President’s conversation with him was demeaning and one of the “most humiliating experiences in decades of public life” (Schmidt & Haberman, 2017). According to research from Saphier and King (1985), there are cultural norms that good leaders employ to grow the school campus. Building on the work from Purkey and Smith, an effective school is distinguished by its culture. Critical to this are concepts that campus leaders employ to drive that culture like collegiality, trust and confidence, appreciation and recognition, and honest, open communication. Donald Trump is surely honest with Mr.

Sessions when he made his public statements, but showed a lack of trust and collegiality when presenting those comments in a demeaning manner.

## Conclusion

The culture that Trump has created in the White House is certainly different, as the President himself promised, given the apparent dysfunction that the media has reported. Analysis of the last nine months of President Trump's tenure indicates that he has created an environment where employees must fall in line to Mr. Trump's agenda or face dismissal. According to *Time* magazine, eleven critical employees have been fired or have left the Trump administration citing disagreement with the president, betrayal to the organization, or personality conflicts. Rath and Conchie (2008) indicate that the most effective leaders invest in the strengths of their employees through engaging them in the process of creating vision and lead others through motivation. Furthermore, great leaders surround themselves with well-rounded individuals that create an effective team while working with those individuals to understand and meet their needs (Rath and Conchie, 2008). In his book *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni (2002) describes the aspects of team culture that can lead to challenges in an organization. The dysfunctions include Absence of Trust, Fear of Conflict, Lack of Commitment, Avoidance of Accountability, and Inattention to Results. Lencioni (2002) describes each dysfunction in detail as to how it contributes to the downfall of the organization if a leader does not address the issues presented. He points out that dysfunction occurs when members of the organization display damaged trust from lack of opportunity to learn from one another, lack of buy-in to community ideas, and setting low standards of behavior which leads to making excuses.

President Trump has shown in his short tenure that a lack of attention to the culture of an organization contributes to a system of dysfunction. Data has shown that his approval ratings have failed consistently since he has taken office, which can be contributed to the clear lack of commitment he has to the people who work for him and to the lack of trust that they have for one another. Trump has displayed a willingness to demean and denounce anyone who works against him or his agenda, an act that will ultimately lead to dismissal from the administration. If compared to leading a high school, Donald Trump would have forced teachers (White House Staff) out of his building, lost trust with his school community (the American people), and created a campus culture of fear, lack of commitment to the campus, and inattention to results (school culture). It would be a campus where teachers would be afraid to come to work and students would lose valuable learning opportunities. A successful culture is key to the successful of any organization, not just our schools, and can only survive if the leader looks beyond himself to grow and develop the people who work for him and the organization he leads.

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