

## Reflections on Processes in School Administration

Aditya Rao

*Faculty (Physics and Chemistry), SelaQui International School*

### **Abstract**

*In this paper, the author reviews some of the aspects of conflicts that arise between administrators and teachers in schools and other educational institutions. Quite often, there are procedural reasons, ranging from hiring policies to policies, which regulate the daily functioning of the institution, for the conflicts that arise in an organization. The paper therefore dwells, through anecdotal examples, on these reasons and their probable resolutions.*

### **Introduction**

It has been my privilege to work as an educator for the better part of a decade now. Having served in various institutions of school as well as university education in different capacities has given me a somewhat broader perspective on the process of running an educational institution than most. During this time, I started at the bottom like everyone does, and then rose to the top. At this point, I have had the experience of working as the youngest, least experienced member of the team, and also as the senior-most (by rank at least) member of a team. The institutions that I have worked for have all been privately owned and have largely catered to the middle to upper-middle class sections of society. I have managed teams of teachers and have also overlooked administrative matters such as infrastructure expansion, staff hires, etc. In this paper, I endeavour to look closely at some of the issues that arise in workplaces. The paper is anecdotal in its approach and deals with real-world examples wherever possible to bring out certain aspects of conflicts between management and teachers in educational institutions.

### **Aligning Individual and Institutional Goals**

The worlds of the senior management of an educational institution, and the rank and file of teachers and coaches that make up the bulk of that institution often seem widely disparate; separated it would seem from each other in thought as well as priorities. It is an oft heard complaint from teachers that the principal, or the chairman, or the trustee has no clue how to run the school. It is an equally oft heard complaint from administrators that teachers don't understand the complexity of having to run a large organisation with many stakeholders and that very often the self-same inefficiencies of the system that they are complaining about are the result of their own incompetence. This is a serious rift between the two components of a system which, under ideal circumstances, is supposed to work in unison, one supporting the other. It is the job of the management to ensure that the teachers are happy and cared for and have the freedom to devote as much time and effort as they wish to the task of improving student achievement. It is the task of the teachers to ensure that the trust of the management is well founded and that they are doing everything in their power to educate the wards in their charge.

The unfortunate reality however is that it is rarely, if ever, that such strong trust exists between an employer and employee. .

Let us take the example of student achievements to begin with. As a teacher once told me - "I can produce 90 percenter students if you give me 60-70 percenters to begin with! But here we have the admissions office letting in everyone without any quality control and yet the targets upon which I am evaluated remain the same! How is that fair? I can't turn students with a batch average of 20% into academic overachievers. It is simply not possible to do."

The teacher in question had a point. To be evaluated solely on the performance of a batch in the final exams without any thought towards the starting averages of the students at the beginning of the year seems a little unfair. But it isn't just about being unfair. A policy which rewards good performance in the final exams over everything else, engenders a class of teachers who train students with the express goal of getting marks. This is very often at odds with the stated mission of educational institutes. The usual rhetoric of the mission statement of many contemporary schools talks about creating independent, curious and original thinkers. The emphasis, at least on paper, is on teaching students how to think rather than on learning by rote to gain marks. The internal logic of this form of training is that the ability of a highly motivated, free thinking student will translate directly into high achievement in life. While we can endlessly debate whether that is true or not, or whether it is true under certain conditions and if so what those conditions may be etc., it leaves open a very large gap wherein no one talks about how one can reconcile this notion with the notion of rewarding teachers based on average marks of a batch in written assessments. This clear dissonance between the stated goals of the institution, and the seemingly non-aligned incentives given to teachers, leads to a situation where the senior management is dissatisfied with the direction the institute is

taking, and the teachers are dissatisfied with the way their work is being underappreciated. This is a problem, even if we assume the ideal situation where everyone in the organization is competent, hardworking, able to look beyond one's ego, and values the best of the institution and the students, above all else. Of course, we all know that this is almost never the case. Every institution struggles with some percentage of people who do not fit one or more of these criteria. The percentage of these people may be high or low, but it is never zero. This is exactly the point at which I now justify the seeming 'unfairness' of the system.

From the management's perspective, it is very difficult to take qualitative data on every employee every day and work out if they are conscientious and valuable members of the team. It is therefore the task of managers to work out a system which gives them a rough estimate of these qualities. This is easier said than done. In the above case for example, the teacher would not like to be judged on a target of 90% achievement score of students, because in their estimate the starting abilities of the students in question are not of that calibre, that is to say that it is unreasonable to expect such a leap in marks in a student in so short a time. Fair enough, a manager might say, what goals would you set? This is a common practice amongst administrators today to let the teachers set their own goals on which they may be evaluated. To overcome the problem of a few teachers setting unreasonably low goals, we put in a safeguard that the goals must be approved by, let's say the academic coordinator, or the head of department, or whoever the organisation might deem fit for the job. This seems like a good way to do it at first, but it comes with its own set of problems. The frequency with which this exercise is undertaken, and the level of punitive measures set for non-achievement, and complementarily the reward for achievement or over-achievement of goals need to be fine-tuned so as to ensure that the process is taken seriously. This is where it gets tricky. Financial incentivisation is the only kind that is taken seriously in most sectors.

It stands to reason, therefore, that performance evaluation in this fashion must also then be linked to remuneration. However, in a lot of schools, the authority to pay out cash bonuses does not lie with mid-level managers, and in many schools it does not lie with the senior management either. School owners, or trustees, or chairmen typically hold control over pay decisions. This leads to lots of layers of approvals and convincing before anyone's pay can be changed drastically, thus fostering a sense of futility in the appraisal exercise as well as low levels of faith in immediate superiors.

### **Keeping up morale to boost productivity**

The question of motivating students and teachers is a complex one. Consistently high morale amongst students in staff is essential for a healthy and productive school atmosphere. However, maintaining such high morale consistently through the school year is difficult, if not near impossible, to do. Many factors play into an individual's level of motivation and productivity at any given time. Broadly, we may classify these into factors that stem from personal affairs, and factors which stem from the institution itself. There would, of course, be a lot of overlap in these, and there would be many situations and circumstances which would resist being classified in to either. Personal reasons for motivation, or loss of it, might range from interpersonal conflict, problems at home, health related concerns, etc. Institutional reasons might include long working hours, additional responsibilities without adequate remuneration, rude colleagues and/or boss, work culture, lack of appropriate down-time etc.

It is incumbent upon the middle and senior leaders of an organisation to manage these factors in such a way as to minimize their influence on efficiency of teachers. This is hardly an easy task. An administrator must think deeply about the processes and policies that they can put in place to increase what I would call the 'feel good quotient' of the work place. This may be through something

as simple as installing a free coffee machine in the staffroom, or instituting a 'fun-hour' every Friday, or it could be through putting in place employee friendly policies for gratuity, insurance, bonuses, children's education etc. In most scenarios, a mixture of these two approaches is ideal. The short-term steps help in providing instant-gratification to employees and work well with people in all stages of their career. The long term policies tend to resonate more with the older staff members.

While it may seem like an additional cost in the early stages, it makes sense to hire a qualified HR professional expressly for this work. It would be an investment which would pay ten-fold dividend in terms of employee satisfaction and retention.

It is very often the case that weak or bad leaders in middle and senior positions lead to high rates of attrition in the school and cause an atmosphere of dissatisfaction to fester. This happens because a lot of times, senior positions are given to people based solely on years of experience, rather than their leadership skills. This is a practice which is, unfortunately, extremely prevalent across schools. Ten years of experience as a teacher doesn't necessarily qualify a teacher to become head of their department or school. While experience is certainly a prerequisite for such a job, it is certainly not the only requirement. I would go so far as to state that experience should only be a secondary consideration while selecting a candidate for higher leadership roles. Their ability to motivate teams, to build coherent working units, their efficiency as administrators, these are the qualities that should take precedence over a simple number indicating their years of experience. While most schools of repute thoroughly whet prospective candidates for Principal or Director, they fail to do so for the lower order, but no less important, roles such as coordinators, heads of department etc. This leads to situations where highly competent principals are stuck with a team of heads who leave much to be desired. As one can imagine, this is a less than ideal

working arrangement and can lead to frustration both in the principal as well as in his or her team.

### **Personality driven conflicts in the workplace**

No institution is without its share of unpleasant people. These people can take the form of a rude boss, a nagging co-worker, a gossip-mongering intern etc. The whole gamut of human failings can be found in workplaces. The role of the senior leadership of an organization, amongst other things, is to minimize the intake of seriously damaging personality types in to its employee mix. As one can appreciate, there is no fool-proof method to do this. In fact, not only is there not an infallible method, most organizations do not even have a method. Cost and expertise is usually a huge barrier to having psychological evaluations as part of the recruitment process. This problem is compounded in schools by the fact that teachers do not have to deal with only adults as part of their daily work. The bulk of their day is in fact spent in the company of children and adolescents. This makes a hiring mistake an even bigger problem since it is very easy for students to model themselves on the examples set for them by their teachers. A rude teacher will subconsciously send the signal out to her students that this kind of behaviour is acceptable. Similarly, a teacher who enjoys denigrating others is likely going to produce a few students at least who emulate similar behaviour. Agreeableness is a highly desirable characteristic in employees and many times the success or failure of a team hinges on the overall ability of each member to get along with every other member. Agreeability in itself is not usually enough, after all if every member of the team is really amicable but also incompetent; the efficiency of the team won't be very high. But, all other things kept equal, agreeability does generally lead to better performance at work. This is something that corporations understand quite well now, with a lot of big companies making it a mandatory part of their recruitment test to check if a prospective employee would 'fit in' well. However, schools are yet to formally embrace

this concept even though it can be argued that it should be, if anything, even more important for a school to evaluate the emotional well-being and psychological suitability of prospective candidates before hiring them.

Take for example the case of a former junior colleague of mine whom we shall call 'X'. X came to us highly recommended by her previous colleagues and with excellent credentials as an English teacher. As a routine procedure, I made a call to her immediate supervisor at the previous school she taught at. While the supervisor was largely positive in her assessment of X, when pressed she hesitated in giving a full 5-star rating to X. This bothered me at the time, but seeing as X was, on paper at least, the best candidate we had had for a while and because I could not afford to keep the post vacant for too long, I hired her. Within two weeks of joining, X had fought with at least 3 different colleagues on matters as trivial as who gets to use the common printer first, or who sits closer to the fan during a meeting. Over the next couple of weeks it became clear that X was a bad hire, she was unnecessarily harsh with students, exceedingly abrasive towards her colleagues, bluntly un-open to suggestions, and yet consistently rated her own performance as being above average and resented not being given additional responsibilities. This in turn, led to a general sense of displeasure amongst other colleagues, who, partially at least, blamed me for having to engage with her. They were right. I made a mistake in hiring her, and my mistake was compounded by the fact that it is almost impossible for a principal to fire a teacher mid-term. It hampers continuity and is very hard to explain to stakeholders like parents and school governors. While I let her go at the end of the term, the few months that she was with us were enough to severely set us back in terms of the goals that we had set. My defence, naturally, would be to say that I did the best I could, given the constraints of the situation – the unexpected departure of the previous teacher, coupled with the dearth of qualified English teachers in a tier two city, and



the complete lack of any rigorous method of psychological assessment of candidates, led me to make a judgment call which turned out to be, in hindsight, wrong.

This is not an isolated incident. Every one of us can think of many an example of bad colleagues ranging from the simply lazy to the actively unpleasant. The organizational nature of schools is such that it makes it difficult to screen such individuals at the entry level, and having hired them, to weed them out of the system. However, schools which are able to get this right more consistently than others tend to build a culture of getting it right, a sort of positive feedback loop. One can learn from these schools and put in place hiring policies which value the right attributes in every prospective candidate and then build a culture of upholding these values.

### **Making sense of processes**

Nobody likes paperwork. I have a particularly severe aversion to paperwork. But, over the years, I have grown to appreciate the importance of well-monitored and well-documented workplace processes. While it is true that a badly designed documentation process can turn a workplace into a graveyard of good intentions, it is equally true that no truly great institution can be built without a system of well-designed and sustainable processes. The difference between a well-managed, well-run institution and an institution which isn't well run is immediately apparent even to a casual visitor. To take an example, I once interviewed for a position as a science teacher at a school in western India. I was asked to be at the school by 9.30 AM and so I arrived five minutes early. On arrival it became quickly clear to me that nobody at the school had any clue that I was expected. The guard station had not been informed and I had to wait a good ten minutes before I was let in. At the reception there was a similar delay before I was asked to take a seat in the

visitor's lounge. The person who was supposed to interview me did not arrive till 11. Through all of this, there was no apparent apology on anyone's face and no one thought it weird that the school was so ill-prepared to receive a prospective candidate for an interview. Consequently, my interview process was a joke. The questions asked were trivial and did not probe deeply. The demo lesson that I gave was unscheduled and was observed by the two teachers who happened to be free at the time. My travel and other costs were not reimbursed because the accounts office had not been given any prior notice. Through all this, not only was it apparent that their HR person had made a mistake, it was also apparent that they had no contingency plan in place for such a situation. The receptionist did not even know whom to call in such an event so that the matter could be sorted out with minimal delay.

Take by contrast another school I was able to observe the interview process at. The candidate was immediately offered a place to sit and some refreshments. Any confusion about whom the candidate had to meet was not expressed in front of the candidate and was discreetly expressed to the head of HR. The interview process was comprehensive and took in all aspects of working at the school. All relevant heads and colleagues had been informed and were expecting the candidate and had a set of questions they wanted answered. The CV of the candidate had been circulated to everyone concerned in advance and their comments and observations had been gathered and documented. Post interview comments were similarly solicited and filed for reference. Throughout all this, the comfort and availability of the candidate was prioritized and his approval was sought before any change in the order of the day's interactions.

The differences between these two institutions indicate the difference between an institution that is likely to do well and one that is likely

to struggle. As a proof of this statement, both these schools started out roughly 15 years ago. Both have similar levels of resources, land etc. However, the first one has seen a steady decline in its student as well as teacher retention in the last seven years, while the second has grown so much that it now has three separate campuses in the same city, all working at full student strength. While it would be naïve to think that this factor

alone is the reason behind the difference in their success, it would be even more naïve to suppose that these things don't matter. An institution's character needs to be built and nurtured exactly as a child's must. Small things can have a big impact on the nature of an organization and consequently can be the determining factor in the institution's success or failure.