

Democratic school leadership - Topic 1: A democratic style of school leadership

Key question: *How can a school principal sustain a democratic school culture?*

Awareness handout 1.2:

Styles of school leadership

Is democracy the best way to respond to the challenges facing our society? Or are there better alternatives? The controversy about this issue has been with us from ancient times to the present. What applies to society, also applies to schools. If we advocate democratic school leadership, it is necessary to consider the alternatives. Let us look at four main types of leadership.

Autocratic leaders tend to make all decisions by themselves. They will argue that this is the most effective style to complete a lot of tasks in a short period of time. That is indeed the strength of autocratic leadership, but its weakness is that the decisions may be opposed or questioned, which in turn increases the likelihood of conflict and the refusal to cooperate. Autocratic leaders underestimate to what extent they depend on others. School rules that are imposed without discussion are disobeyed more frequently, which is counterproductive in dealing with misconduct and bullying. Autocratic leadership often follows the status quo and given conventions, offering little in terms of innovation and development. Academic results are poor in autocratically led schools, as the students' specific needs for support and encouragement receive little attention.

Laissez-faire leadership is characterized by the lack of clearly defined procedures for decision-making and little involvement by the leader in decision-making processes. Time for discussions is not clearly limited, so the efficiency of decision-making and school management is poor. On the other hand, the strength of this type of leadership is a low level of aggression and conflicts in the school community.

Paternalistic leaders act as parental figures by taking care of their subordinates as a parent would, without giving them any responsibility or freedom of choice. In this type of leadership, the leader shows concern and cares for his staff. In return, he expects trust, loyalty, and obedience. Teachers are expected to be totally committed to what the leader believes in and to refrain from making their own choices or working independently. The teachers are expected to remain employed in the same school for a longer time to strengthen loyalty and trust. Paternalistic leadership tends to divide the staff, as the school leader will reward his favorite teachers for their loyalty with special treatment and opportunities like projects, trips, training, etc.

A democratic style of leadership offers the potential to overcome the weaknesses that the other types of leadership tend to develop. A democratic school leader ensures that all members of the school community are involved in the decision-making process – but participation will vary, depending on the context. Students will not participate in every decision and the leader may not always have the last word. In some cases, he may confine himself to facilitating an agreement among the staff or the whole school community, or accept a decision he does not support himself.

Leadership and responsibility are shared, and frequently there are leaders of subgroups. The more members of the school community participate in the process – the school leader, the staff, students, housekeepers, office staff, perhaps also parents and external stakeholders, the clearer the picture of different interests, views and values will be. The strength of democratic school leadership lies in its potential to produce decisions and solutions that are widely accepted and supported, provided all interests and queries have been taken into account. The learning effort required for the different groups in the school community to develop their full participation potential may be quite daunting, but it is rewarding. The school community can develop a democratic school culture with an open and friendly atmosphere. Its members will be more motivated and committed, formal and informal communication will thrive, both involving the school leader and the school community. Discipline will improve if the students feel responsible for their school as well. The school will achieve higher academic results by accommodating the diversified abilities and talents of its students.

Democratic school leadership therefore has strong potential as well as challenges. The more members participate, the more complex the processes of discussion, consensus-building and decision-making will be. Autocratic shortcuts to efficient decision-making may then seem to offer an attractive alternative. We argue that it is worth the effort to deal with this complexity, as your students should learn how to thrive in ambivalent and unclear situations (see [Competences for democratic culture](#), p. 43). Democratically led schools support their societies by educating their students to become citizens who are competent and confident to take part in controversial and dynamic decision-making processes.