CREATIVE LEADERSHIP RESOURCE, PART 2

LEADERSHIP AND THE 4 SQUARE MODEL OF CREATIVE DECISION-MAKING

by Gary Waddell, Ed.D.

Educational leaders make a host of key decisions each and every day. These decisions directly impact the lives of students and those who serve them. Those who lead with a high degree of creativity cultivate the design of more innovative solutions to problems of practice. Creative leadership involves problem solving efforts that invite educators to think in new, and sometimes unconventional, ways. It is fueled by vision, requires some courage to try previously unproven solutions, and relies on a core belief in the ability of teams to iterate and create solutions that can be subsequently prototyped, adjusted, and refined.

This type of leadership is built on a foundation of empathy and honoring the perspective of another. Leaders master strategies to gain depth of understanding around the lived experience of others lead with a higher degree of humility and self-reflection. The combination of these two variables, creativity and empathy, provides a roadmap to better understand leadership. Acquiring additional skills in these two domains can lead to improved outcomes in educational organizations. The 4 Square Model of Creative Decision-Making illustrates the manner in which decision-making and leadership shift as a result of the application of creativity and empathy.

4 SQUARE MODEL OF CREATIVE DECISION-MAKING

The 4 Square Model of Creative Decision-Making provides a roadmap to the development of leadership along two axes, creativity and empathy/input. The model is framed around the notion that the most impactful decision-making occurs when both creativity and empathy are fully developed and illustrates the types of decision-making that is typical when these variables are present in differing degrees.

Not every leader resides in one domain or another. In fact, many skillful leaders bring different skill sets and strengths to bear across a spectrum of decision-making contexts. The skillful leader makes use of both creative processes as well as empathy-based skills that are appropriate to a given situation. They assess when various modes of decision-making are indicated and bring the necessary skills to the forefront when they are needed. This 4 Square model provides a means for identifying the processes best needed for problem-solving and implementation of organizational and programmatic goals.
CREATIVITY AND EMPATHY / INPUT

**X Axis: Creativity**
Along the X axis is creativity. Leaders move from low to high degrees of implementation along this axis when they employ design thinking through interactive, arts-based, creative activities and group processes. Leaders exhibiting higher competency along this axis internalize the inherent value of innovation and originality. They dedicate time and space to generative tasks and group processes that elicit new ways of thinking. They have strategies to connect teams and engage their resourcefulness and imagination.

Examples of proficiency along this axis include group processes that ignite creativity such as those grounded in art-making, improvisation, dance/movement, music, digital composition, visual art creation or analysis. These types of tasks are often leveraged to connect a team, loosen their capacity for out of the box thinking, and engage the right hemispheres of their brains before they began to tackle a problem of practice. Similarly, this focus on generative thinking can materialize in free-form brainstorming and iterating around potential solutions to problems of practice.

**Y Axis: Empathy / Input**
Along the Y axis are the domains of empathy and input. Leaders move along this axis as they employ design and decision-making processes that are increasingly inclusive and grounded in empathy and by knowing and honoring the lived experiences of others. Movement along this axis suggests incorporating greater degrees of humility and soliciting understanding by honoring input as decisions are made. In this axis, programmatic designs are developed by setting aside preconceptions and personal views of the world to consider diverse perspectives and viewpoints of others. Co-creation of inclusive solutions honoring different points of view is a signature of this axis.

Examples of proficiency along this axis include using formal and informal means of soliciting and analyzing the lived experience of the others. This can include formal processes such as the conduct of empathy interviews as well as other ways of understanding multiple perspectives such as focus groups. Proficiency at the highest levels of implementation reflect systematic ways of seeking input and deep understanding of multiple perspectives that are woven into the fabric of decision-making processes.

**4-SQUARE MODEL OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy/Input</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
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</tbody>
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**1 - DOER**
- Routine decision-making
- Traditional model
- Low input
- Focus on routine over creativity

**2 - EXPLORER**
- Focus on team building
- Emphasis on Creative tasks
- Creative tasks are not integrated in problem-solving processes

**3 - COLLABORATOR**
- Isolated, structured input
- Prioritizes perspective-seeking
- Targeted focus

**4 - DESIGNER**
- Empathy-based design
- High input/high creativity
- Engaging and Creative process

The four square represent the impact of lower versus higher degrees of creativity and empathy/input.

4 Square Model of Creative Leadership, ©2022 by Gary Waddell, Ed.D. Used with permission.
The Doer

Decisions in this quadrant exemplify lower levels of creativity and empathy/input. Decision-making here is made without significant internal or external input. The “Doer’s” decision-making is made without the context of the experiences and perspectives of others, resulting in little creativity or generative thinking that is reflected in the solutions identified. These decisions tend to be designed for quick, decisive action and are often made more expediently than those in other quadrants.

The Explorer

Decisions in this quadrant exhibit few strategies for input and empathy but show high levels of creativity. The explorer has an innate understanding of the potential of innovative thinking to transform the life of an organization or program. They dedicate time and energy to activities that grow the creative capacity of their teams. Leaders in this quadrant may focus on shifting an organization’s culture into one that is firmly tethered to creativity, although these practices may not yet be incorporated into the daily practice of decision-making.

The Collaborator

Decisions emerging from this quadrant are grounded in empathy and input-seeking. The Collaborator arrives at decisions after consideration of the perspectives of others, but do not engage their teams in processes that unleash creative problem-solving that maximizes imagination and innovation. Leaders may work from this space when a decision is lower stakes or when they have targeted decisions to make. They deeply value input into decisions, however, systemic input that is grounded in creative, innovative thinking is not entirely apparent.

The Designer

Decisions that emerge from this quadrant are firmly grounded in both empathy/input as well as in creativity and exemplify the most nuanced and design thinking and innovative solutions. Leadership processes here tend to be systematic, involving ongoing implementation of creative, arts-based tasks to encourage creativity as well as group processes that are grounded in divergent thinking. Decision-making in this quadrant is similarly firmly rooted in empathy and ways of knowing the lived experiences of others.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Every leader operates from each of the quadrants from time to time. Where are you the most comfortable as a leader?
- How can you move a team closer to the Designer quadrant when facing a complex problem that requires a solution involving both empathy and creativity?
- What strategies can you employ when a team needs to enhance their creativity?
- How would you help a team lean in to greater empathy and input prior to decision-making?
SUMMARY

Leadership and intentional decision-making is a complex endeavor. The 4 Quadrant Model of Creative Decision-Making illustrates the benefits that leaders and teams reap when they employ processes grounded in both creativity as well and input and empathy. While not every decision-making process looks the same, leaders who have strategies of both creative leadership as well as empathic design are equipped to handle a host of leadership challenges.

Leaders who build the creativity of their teams, establish environments that are innovative and engaging, and that frame failure as a necessary condition for innovation, tend to build teams that are engaged, connected, and motivated. The seemingly intractable problems of practice that today’s leaders encounter require our best, most creative solutions.

Similarly, leaders who begin with that notion of impact and who seek out the lived experience of others understand the problems before them with more depth and nuance. They master the habits of mind and strategies that encourage input, diversity of thought, and respectful debate and discourse. As a consequence, they tend to develop solutions that are more meaningful in the lives of those that they are designed to impact.

THINK ABOUT THIS

- What is your leadership style? How can practicing competencies in both creativity and input deepen your own practice and be incorporated into your leadership style?
- How can arts leaders and practitioners be essential partners and allies in infusing higher levels of creativity into the life of your organization, including decision-making processes?
- Creativity and empathy are not zero sum games. They are not “all or nothing”, but are domains to be continually improved upon. How can you employ self-reflection to ensure that you are building your capacity in both creativity and empathy?

Want to Learn More?

As you build your mastery of empathy and creativity in your leadership practice, the following resources provide some opportunities to dig more deeply into some of the concepts presented here.


Waddell, Gary. The Art of Everything: Leading for We in the Age of Me. 2020.
