The structure of principal-teacher conversation: Why it matters for school leadership

Curt Adams
University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, USA, and
Olajumoke Beulah Adigun
Oklahoma State University System, Stillwater, Oklahoma, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This study addressed a relatively understudied process of school leadership: the principal-teacher conversation about instructional change. Two distinct conversation structures were examined: controlling conversation and transformative leadership conversation (TLC). Self-determination theory (SDT) was used to make the case that TLC is a better fit for instructional change than controlling conversation. Hypotheses were developed on the relationship between principal-teacher conversation and teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality. These mental states were identified for empirical testing because of their influence on change processes.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical study used a correlational research design with survey data. The data came from a random sample of 2,500 teachers from the population of certified teachers in a southwestern state in the USA. Useable survey responses were obtained from 1,615 teachers, for a response rate of 65 percent. Teachers in the sample averaged 15 years of teaching experience, with 7 years in their current school. Around 81% of teachers identified as female and 18 percent as male and 79% of teachers listed a racial identification as white. Hypotheses were tested in a path model using AMOS 28.0 with robust maximum likelihood (MLR).

Findings – As hypothesized, TLC had moderate to strong positive relationships with teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality. Controlling conversation had small, negative relationships with teacher trust in the principal and teacher autonomy. Controlling conversation was not related to teacher vitality in the path analysis. Compared with controlling conversation, TLC had stronger relationships with teacher mental states.

Originality/value – The results of this study begin to reveal useful evidence on the inherent social-psychological mechanisms active in principal-teacher conversations. With results indicating that conversation structure has consequences for positive teacher mental states, the study directs attention to a ubiquitous yet understudied leadership process.

Keywords Principal-teacher conversation, Trust in principal, Teacher autonomy, Teacher vitality, School leadership

Principal-teacher conversation is arguably one of the least understood leadership processes in schools (Anderson and Mungal, 2016). The practical concern with this point is that the principal-teacher conversation affects, to varying degrees, every decision, task and responsibility for leading and managing schools. Furthermore, leadership concepts that define the principalship – transformational leadership, instructional leadership, learning leadership and distributed leadership, to name a few – depend on the mutual exchange of thoughts, experience, knowledge, ideas and other information related to teaching, learning and school performance (Leithwood et al., 2008; Maslowski et al., 2016). The point is that understanding the social-psychological mechanisms behind the principal-teacher conversation matters for school leadership.

An assumption behind this research is that effective conversation, like leadership, is contingent on the complexity associated with a particular task or pursuit. This study is concerned with principal-teacher conversations about instructional change. Instructional
change was set as the subject of conversation due to the complexities associated with re-
structuring teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2013; Hauge et al., 2014; Hopkins et al., 2013) and
the growing recognition that instructional practices need to be transformed for intellectually
changing academic standards to be achieved (Shirrell et al., 2019). Two distinct conversation
structures were examined: controlling conversation and transformative leadership
conversation (TLC). These structures reflect different approaches used to engage teachers
in change processes.

The paper begins by articulating an argument that the purpose behind a conversation
should determine the choice of conversation structure to be used and that controlling
conversation and TLC are designed for different purposes. Next, self-determination theory
(SDT) is used to describe tasks and pursuits in which a controlling conversation structure
may be effective and when TLC would be useful. SDT also informs hypotheses about
principal-teacher conversation and teacher mental states of trust in the principal, teacher
autonomy and teacher vitality. These mental states were identified for empirical
investigation because of their importance for supporting teachers in the type of adaptive
functioning required for instructional change (Frederick and Ryan, 2023; Tschannen-Moran
and Gareis, 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Hypotheses were tested using path analysis with
data from 1,615 teachers in a southwestern USA state.

The purpose and structure of the principal-teacher conversation

Pridham (2001) argues that effective conversation requires an alignment between the purpose
behind interactions and the structure that guides and shapes the conversation. Conversation
purpose is an important consideration for structuring principal-teacher talk. Purpose relates
to the reason for conversation, problems and issues that need to be addressed and the
pursuits and outcomes conversation aims to facilitate (Isaacs, 1999). This study distinguishes
between the purpose and structure of controlling conversation, which is suited for external
regulation of behavior and task management, and TLC, which is designed to activate the
autonomous motivation of individuals for engaging in the transformation process.

Controlling conversation: its purpose and structure

In schools, when the purpose is to manage actions and/or to regulate compliance with
expectations, strategies or protocols, the principal-teacher conversation can benefit from an
externally controlling structure. This is what Gronn (1983) and Lowenhaupt (2014) found in
their studies of principal talk. In Gronn’s case, he found that unidirectional, authoritative and
parsimonious talk was effective for external behavior control. The kind of talk used for
control involved simple and clear communication and listening in a way that allowed actions
to be re-directed toward pre-determined expectations. Similarly, in Lowenhaupt’s (2014)
study, she found that language appealing to reason, ethics and emotions externally motivated
teachers to adopt mandated instructional and curricular changes in their classrooms. COVID-
19 responses are a more proximal example of when external control has utility for principal-
teacher talk. During COVID-19, it was helpful for teachers to know what to do for distance
learning and other protocols, how to do it and where to find support. Clear and unequivocal
information communicated directly by school leaders benefited teachers (Anderson and

Comparable to what Groysberg and Slind (2012) describe as command-and-control talk,
controlling conversation is more transactional and unidirectional than collaborative and
reciprocal (Palmer, 1989). The purpose of controlling conversation is to manage and control
individual and group behavior by communicating information from authority positions
(Groysberg and Slind, 2012). To do this, language is clear and easy to understand, it makes
known expectations and how they are to be achieved and the tone conveys the importance of complying with expected behavior and routines (Palmer, 1989). Listening is used selectively in a way that can confirm the effectiveness of the direction set by leaders and re-direct actions when they deviate from identified plans (Murphy, 2020; Ng and Bradac, 1993).

External control is a common force that school leaders use to implement instructional reforms (Rowan and Miller, 2007), but external behavior regulation often misses a fundamental feature of instructional change. Leading instructional change depends on re-structuring many deeply rooted relationships in classrooms. These relationships encompass a broad spectrum of interactions that span teachers, students, resources and activities, which are held in place by engrained beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning and student ability (Sarason, 1996; Schlechty, 2009). Transforming patterned ways of interacting in a classroom is an entirely different process than managing the implementation of change from an authority position (Kuipers et al., 2014; Murphy and Hallinger, 1992; Nichols, 2022). As such, controlling conversation is not designed for pursuits that require transformation.

Transformation is lived through the energy and capacity in people as they learn and grow through challenges and difficulties that surface when pursuing a new reality (Dutton et al., 2007). Often, transformation gets equated with whole-system or whole-school change, but transforming social structures with other people varies in scope, depth and complexity (Adams et al., 2023). The purpose can be to transform an individual way of being, interpersonal relationships or group dynamics. No matter the scale, unraveling one way of being and constructing different relationships and realities does not occur externally. As Argyris (1982, 1997) and Schön (1995) found nearly three decades ago, such work is internal, requiring learning in and through action, which is the purpose of TLC.

Transformative leadership conversation: its purpose and structure
TLC was designed for the complex work of transforming established interactions, ways of being and entrenched social structures that impede people from accomplishing desired realities (Adams et al., 2023). TLC is defined as sense-making and learning dialog used to fundamentally restructure how people see reality and how they relate to the self, others and the environment (Adams et al., 2023). Dialog is the foundation of TLC. It sets the tone for using conversation to reshape ways of seeing, doing and being. Sense-making and learning add a clear purpose to dialog. With sense-making dialog, the purpose is to raise awareness of preconceptions, assumptions and biases that shape our mental representations of a desired reality and how the reality can be brought to life (Ancona, 2011; Isaacs, 1999; Weick et al., 2005). Learning dialog examines how actions and interactions are or are not moving toward an aspirational reality (Marshak, 2019).

Together, sense-making and learning dialog keep transformation moving in and out of mental representations and actions through three interactive dialogs: dialog with self, dialog with others and dialog with the social context (Adams et al., 2023). Dialog with the self is an introspective process that places people in an internal conversation with preconceptions, assumptions and biases that shape their mental representations (Bohm, 1996). Dialog with others moves sense-making from one’s latent mental representation toward a socially constructed understanding of how desired realities may be lived through the actions and interactions people have with each other and with organizational structures (Freire, 1998). Dialog with social context examines how the system is functioning in use and practice (Isaacs, 1999).

Dialog is not new to leadership practice (Adams et al., 2019; Shields and Edwards, 2005), but as Gergen and Hersted (2016) argue, the conceptual appeal has not resulted in substantive application, particularly by school principals. TLC addresses this limitation by using...
framing, questioning and listening and affirming language to bring people into meaning-making conversations about actions intended to create a new reality. Framing establishes a direction and structure for sense-making and learning dialog (Fairhurst, 2008). Questioning and listening activate dialog with the self, others and the social environment (Berger, 2019; Brookfield, 2011; Isaacs, 1999; Paul and Elder, 2007). With affirming language, leaders recognize thoughts and perspectives shared by people while also encouraging, supporting and inviting people to delve deeper into their thoughts and actions (Marshak, 2019).

TLC’s structure is ideally suited for expectations placed on schools and teachers to change instruction in ways that deepen learning experiences and outcomes for students. Whether the purpose is to raise achievement, close achievement gaps, foster creativity and problem solving, promote deeper learning, reduce disparities and inequalities, help children heal from adverse childhood experiences, integrate technology or re-imagine discipline and even schooling, just to name a few aspirations for schools, these realities are not likely to emerge without transforming social conditions that lie at the root of observed problems (Schlechty, 2009; Shields and Edwards, 2005). The many small and larger transformations required to make classrooms places where teachers and students reach their life potential require building teacher capacity more than forcing compliance (Murphy, 2015). The capacity of teachers to engage in transformative work seems predicated on facilitating sense-making and learning dialog. And questioning, listening and affirming language are conversational structures that can facilitate interactions in which learning merges with action.

Theoretical framework
SDT provides a useful framework to understand the contingent use of principal-teacher conversation. SDT explains differences in human motivation and behavior as resulting from a dynamic interaction between social and psychological processes (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Of value for principal-teacher conversation is evidence on the functionality of extrinsic motivators. Extrinsic motivators are social forces outside of a person that interact with psychological states to affect the type of motivation behind a person’s behavior and actions (Ryan and Deci, 2020). Conversation is a social force, and thus, it is an extrinsic motivator that has consequences for teachers’ psychological states (Adams et al., 2023). According to SDT, extrinsic motivators stimulate different types of regulation: external regulation, introjected regulation, identification and internalization (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

External and introjected regulations are low in autonomous and self-directed functioning, whereas identification and internalization are high in autonomous motivation and action (Ryan et al., 2021). Controlling conversation relies on external and introjected regulation to direct behavior. External and introjected regulation can be effective for certain types of tasks and behaviors in organizations (Deci et al., 2001). Such tasks are generally defined as simple and algorithmic, where people can accomplish a goal by following a clear set of steps (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Weibel et al., 2010). For these tasks, both external and introjected regulations have value as long as the external mechanisms remain prevalent and attractive enough to a person (Ryan et al., 2021).

Instructional change is not a simple task; it involves reframing mindsets and re-structuring many dynamic relationships that define learning experiences in classrooms (Geijsel et al., 2009; Tai and Kareem, 2018). As evidence informing SDT demonstrates, work that is complex, adaptive and informed by mental heuristics does not respond well to external and introjected regulation (Deci et al., 2001; Shirom, 2010). These situations depend on people functioning from their own autonomous motivation (Carmeli, 2009; Dubreuil et al., 2014). Autonomous forms of motivation like identification and internalization are nurtured through people’s psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2020; Shirom, 2010; Tummers et al., 2018). Autonomy is a feeling and belief of volition, of being in control of one’s actions and...
outcomes. Competence is a feeling and belief of effectiveness, of possessing the competencies to accomplish tasks at a productive and high level. Relatedness is a feeling and belief of connectedness to other people and to the principles and values of groups and organizations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The support of these psychological needs has been demonstrated in multiple contexts to generate the inner energy and vitality behind adaptive and high-functioning behavior (Frederick and Ryan, 2023; Ryan and Deci, 2008; Shirom, 2010).

Social forces found to generate instructional changes are those that activate and sustain teachers’ psychological needs (Geijsel et al., 2009; Murphy, 2015). Questioning, listening and affirming language, the integrated conversational structures of TLC, are better equipped to activate teacher psychological needs than controlling conversation (Adams et al., 2023). Controlling conversation regulates behavior by restricting teacher autonomy and limiting teacher discretion to adapt and adjust to changing dynamics in the classroom. Certainly, there are situations in which controlling conversation is necessary for teachers as they work toward instructional changes, and as described by Gronn (1983) and Lowenhaupt (2014), such structures may have some short-term power to influence teacher actions. However, the many small and larger transformations required to re-structure instructional relationships seemingly benefit from a conversation structure that facilitates teacher sense-making and learning.

**Rationale and hypotheses**

The present study advances a set of hypotheses about social and psychological processes that enable teachers to work productively through tensions and challenges associated with instructional change. These hypotheses are directed toward the assumption that TLC is a better fit for instructional change than controlling conversation. Teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality were identified for the empirical test. These mental states were identified for empirical investigation because of their importance for supporting teachers in the type of adaptive functioning required for instructional change (Frederick and Ryan, 2023; Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

**Principal-teacher conversation and trust in the principal**

Trust in the principal is a confident belief that the school principal acts with competence, benevolence, openness, honesty and reliability (Forsyth et al., 2011). When teachers trust the principal, they are more willing to risk vulnerability, to work cooperatively and reciprocally toward shared interests and goals and to experience more satisfaction and fulfillment in teaching (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015). Research suggests that principals cultivate trust through social controls that encourage professional discretion (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), by being present and authentically engaged with teachers (Forsyth et al., 2011) and by being interested and concerned with quality teaching and learning (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

TLC, through questioning, listening and affirming language, aligns with general leadership behaviors related to trust. TLC requires that principals be present and available to teachers, engaged in thinking with teachers about their experiences and genuinely interested in their struggles and well-being (Adams et al., 2023). Controlling conversation works differently than TLC; it seeks to remove discretion from teachers by making expected instructional practices clear, by telling teachers what to change and how to change and by forcing compliance to expectations. Such conversation may be useful for school principals at certain times, but as SDT implies, complex work like instructional change depends on enhancing teachers’ inner capacity to adapt and persist through inevitable tensions and difficulties in re-structuring established relationships and routines. Appropriately structured professional discretion is essential for instructional change (Cohen et al., 2013; Geijsel et al., 2009), and as Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2019) argue, trust and discretion go together.
Principal-teacher interactions capable of cultivating discretion support trust and trust supports discretion. TLC relies on conversational structures that enhance teachers’ professional discretion, whereas controlling conversation constraints discretion by commanding and controlling teacher actions. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H1.** TLC will have a positive relationship with teacher trust in the principal, and controlling conversations will have a negative relationship.

Principal-teacher conversation teacher autonomy

As a psychological need, autonomy is an inner nutrient for adaptive functioning, growth, well-being and fulfillment (Ryan and Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Teacher autonomy is defined as a state of volition and self-regulation where a teacher endorses her/his control over actions and outcomes (Guay et al., 2020). Autonomy is nurtured when relationships and interactions express value for the experiences and perspectives of others, afford individual choices and discretion, promote self-regulation and responsibility and provide a useful structure to engage in pursuits (Ryan and Deci, 2020).

TLC, more so than controlling conversation, is structured to nurture teacher autonomy. The act of asking questions, listening nonjudgmentally and with curiosity and affirming experiences and perspectives is consistent with leadership behaviors identified as supportive of employee autonomy. Such behaviors consist of taking an interest in employee perspectives, affording choice and opportunities for self-directed actions and fostering personal initiative (Slemp et al., 2018). Conversely, a management style based on close supervision, monitoring and external control has been found to restrict employee autonomy (Van Tuin et al., 2020). TLC works through teacher volition and self-determination to engage in change processes, whereas controlling conversation situates power within the authority of the principal. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2.** TLC will have a positive relationship with teacher autonomy, and controlling conversation will have a negative relationship.

Principal-teacher conversation and teacher vitality

Vitality is a eudemonic state of well-being felt as an inner aliveness, vigor and calm presence (Frederick and Ryan, 2023; Ryan and Frederick, 1997); it is an internal physical and mental energy available to the self that activates self-determined and purposeful action (Ryan and Deci, 2008; Ryan and Frederick, 1997). Studies deriving from Baumeister and colleagues’ ego depletion model (see Baumeister, 2003; Baumeister et al., 1998, 2000) indicate that controlled regulation can deplete one’s inner energy to engage in and persist in future tasks. Autonomous regulation, in contrast to control, has been shown to enhance inner energy for subsequent activities (Moller et al., 2006; Muraven, 2008; Muraven et al., 2007; Ryan and Deci, 2008).

TLC and controlling conversation are likely to have different relationships to vitality. Controlling conversation does not depend on activating teachers’ inner resources to direct and guide how teachers engage in pursuits. External control places power in the authority of the principal to manage behavior in ways that are consistent with established standards and expectations. There are times when the principal-teacher conversation needs to hold teachers accountable to a plan, but if control becomes a normalized conversation structure, it can deplete the natural desire of teachers to engage their work with curiosity and passion. TLC, on the other hand, is designed to harness the teacher’s inner motivational resource through the use of questions, listening and affirming language. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H3.** TLC will have a positive relationship with teacher vitality and controlling conversation will have a negative relationship.
Empirical methods
Hypotheses were tested using a correlational research design involving teacher survey data. Teachers were the unit of analysis. The purpose was to determine the extent to which individual teachers’ conversations with principals about instructional change were related to adaptive mental states. The data came from a random sample of 2,500 teachers from the population of all certified teachers in a southwestern state in the USA. All certified teachers during the 2022–2023 school year were included in a data file and randomly sampled using SPSS 28.0. Sampled teachers received an electronic survey emailed directly to their email addresses. A total of three follow-up emails were used with non-respondents. Useable responses were obtained from 1,615 teachers, for a response rate of 65%. Teachers in the sample averaged 15 years of teaching experience, with 7 years in their current school. 81% of teachers identified as female and 18% as male, and 79% of teachers listed their racial identification as white. Of the teachers in the sample, 46% taught in an elementary school, 20% in a middle school and 35% in a high school. Teacher demographics are similar to the state teacher population. In the state, 81% of teachers identified as white, 50% taught in elementary schools, 18% in middle schools and 32% in high schools.

Measures
Transformative leadership conversation. The 12-item version of the TLC scale (Adams et al., 2023) was used to operationalize the structural features of TLC. The scale begins with the prompt “in conversations with me about an aspirational change, my school principal generally,” followed by items that operationalize questioning, listening and affirming language. Sample items include: “Asks questions that allow me to think about assumptions I make in my work;” “Listens to understand what I am experiencing; ” and “Recognizes the work I do with encouragement.” Items use a five-point Likert response set ranging from 1 Never, to 5 Always. The 12 items used for this study have strong internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach alpha of 0.94.

Principal use of controlling conversation. Controlling conversation is authoritative, transactional and unidirectional (Groysberg and Slind, 2012). Items to operationalize controlling conversation were included in the TLC survey. The survey begins with the prompt, “in conversations with me about an aspirational change, my school principal generally,” followed by five items that operationalize conversations used as external control: “tells me how she/he wants me to change my practices,” “doesn’t show any interest in listening to what I have to say,” “insists on his/her way of doing things,” “talks for most of the time,” “doesn’t really listen to me at all” and “focuses on things I am not doing well.” Item consistency was strong, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.89.

Teacher vitality. Teacher vitality was measured with four items from the subjective vitality scale developed by Ryan and Frederick (1997). The scale measures the degree to which people feel alive, alert and vigorous in life. Items were adapted by making the teaching context the referent: “I feel alive and vital in the work we are doing at my school.” “I feel very energized by the work we are doing at my school.” “I have energy and spirit when I am at school.” “I look forward to each new day at my school.” Items used a five-point Likert response set that ranged from 1, Never, to 5, Always. A Cronbach alpha of 0.90 indicates good item consistency.

Teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy was measured with four items from the basic psychological need satisfaction at work scale (Deci et al., 2001; Longo et al., 2016). Items were adapted to fit the teaching context. Sample items included “At school, I feel a sense of freedom in the things I undertake,” “I feel I can teach students no matter the circumstance” and “I feel my choices in teaching express who I really am.” A five-point Likert response set was used with responses ranging from 1 Not at All True, to 5, Very True. A Cronbach alpha of 0.83 indicates good item consistency.
Analysis
Hypotheses were tested in a path model using AMOS 28.0 with robust maximum likelihood (MLR). MLR was the chosen estimation method because it is robust to violations of non-normality and can be used with ordinal Likert-type items (Finney and Distefano, 2006). Assessment of model fit was considered using Hu and Bentler’s (1999) recommendations and included common fit indices such as the model’s scaled chi-square value, the comparative fit index (CFI >0.95) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA <0.06). Parameter estimates were examined to test the strength of the hypothesized structural relationships among the variance and covariance of the sample data.

Limitations
The correlational research design has limitations that affect the knowledge claims advanced from the empirical evidence. First, the lack of experimental controls and the reliance on ex post facto survey data mean that the estimates in the path analysis do not support causal claims about the structural relationships. Second, parameter estimates report the strength and direction of relationships, but we cannot rule out the possibility that unaddressed rival hypotheses might confound the strength of the relationships with the observed data. Third, the path analysis does not compare the effects of TLC and controlling conversations against other leadership practices that may support or hinder trust, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality.

Results
Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and bivariate correlation coefficients for the primary variables in the study and a few teacher characteristics. Teacher characteristics were included to determine if any variables would need to be used as co-variates in the path analysis. Means for the primary variables show that teachers reported slightly higher average autonomy (3.64) and vitality (3.61) than trust in principal (3.57), TLC (3.20) and controlling conversation (2.58).

Bivariate correlations show strong to moderate, positive relationships between TLC and trust in the principal (r = 0.83, p < 0.01), TLC and teacher autonomy (r = 0.44, p < 0.01) and TLC and teacher vitality (r = 0.56, p < 0.01). Controlling conversation had strong to moderate, negative relationships with trust in the principal (r = −0.44, p < 0.01), teacher autonomy (r = −0.31, p < 0.01) and teacher vitality (r = −0.30, p < 0.01). TLC and controlling conversation had a moderate, negative relationship (r = −0.35, p < 0.01). Teacher characteristics had very small and non-statistically significant relationships with trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality.

Results to test the hypotheses are presented in Table 2 and Figure 1. Table 2 provides the fit indices for the path model compared against Hu and Bentler’s (1999) criteria. The estimated fit indices describe a good fit between the estimated variances and covariances of the observed model with the hypothesized path relationships (Shi et al., 2019). A chi-square of 11.48 was statistically significant, but the relative fit indices fell within the acceptable range: Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) was 0.96, normed fit index (NFI) was 0.99, CFI was 0.99 and RMSEA was 0.08.

Path estimates in Figure 1 address the hypotheses. For the first hypothesis, results show that TLC and controlling conversation both had statistically significant relationships with teacher trust in principal. As predicted, TLC had a strong, positive relationship with trust in the principal (β = 0.77, p < 0.01), and controlling conversation had a small, negative relationship (β = −0.17, p < 0.01). Additionally, TLC had a stronger, unique effect than controlling conversation. TLC and controlling conversation combined to explain 72% of the variance in trust in the principal.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>TTP</th>
<th>TLC</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>YrS</th>
<th>YrT</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>White</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
<td>–0.30**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>TA</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>–0.31**</td>
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<tr>
<td>TTP</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.83**</td>
<td>–0.44**</td>
<td>–0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLC</td>
<td>3.20</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–0.35**</td>
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<td>–0.09*</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>White</td>
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**Note(s):** **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, N = 1615.** Means for the measured variables are the average item response for survey questions. YrS reports the average number of years teachers have been teaching in their current school. YrT report the average number of years in the teaching profession. TV is teacher vitality. TA is teacher autonomy. TTP is teacher trust in principal. TLC is transformative leadership conversation. CC is principal controlling conversation.

**Source(s):** This table is the property of the authors.
For hypothesis Figure 2, results show that TLC and controlling conversation both had statistically significant relationships with teacher autonomy. As predicted, TLC had a moderate, positive relationship with teacher autonomy ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$) and controlling conversation a small, negative relationship ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the TLC–teacher autonomy relationship was stronger than the controlling conversation–teacher autonomy relationship. TLC and controlling conversation combined to explain approximately 22% of the variance in teacher autonomy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fit index</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Observed model</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFI</td>
<td>$&gt;0.95$</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>$&gt;0.95$</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>$&gt;0.95$</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Model fit indices for the fully latent structural equation model

Note(s): **$p < 0.01$; N = 1615
Source(s): This table is the property of the authors

Figure 1. Path model for the relationships between principal-teacher conversation and trust in principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality

Source(s): This figure is the property of the authors

Figure 2. Standardized parameter estimates for the path analysis with standard errors in parentheses

Note(s): $R^2$ for TTP = 0.72, $R^2$ for TA = 0.22, and $R^2$ for TV = 0.44
Source(s): This figure is the property of the authors
For hypothesis three, results show that TLC had a statistically significant relationship with teacher vitality but was not controlling conversation. What was different for teacher vitality were paths between trust and vitality and autonomy and vitality, along with TLC and controlling conversation. Even with these paths, TLC had a moderate, positive relationship with vitality ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.01$), stronger than controlling conversation and trust in the principal ($\beta = 0.15, p < 0.01$), but was not as strong as teacher autonomy ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.01$). The combined model explained approximately 44% of the variance in teacher vitality.

In summary, evidence from the path model supports hypotheses one and two. Both TLC and controlling conversation were related to trust in principal and teacher autonomy. Additionally, TLC had a stronger relationship with both variables. There is partial support for hypothesis three. TLC had a statistically significant relationship with teacher vitality, even with trust and autonomy included in the analysis. Controlling conversation did not have a statistically significant relationship with teacher vitality.

Discussion
Scholars have argued that conversation is leadership, not merely an element of leadership practice (Fairhurst, 2008; Groysberg and Slind, 2012). Conversation and leadership may be inextricably related, but this does not mean that conversation is always effective at leading people toward a desired reality. Instructional change is a case in point. Conversation used as an external control may have worked to administer schools 50 years ago, as Gronn (1983) found, but such use of conversation inhibits teacher learning and restricts their ability to adapt to frequently changing situations (Shields and Edwards, 2005). Evidence in this study suggests that a controlling approach toward teachers might actually impede efforts to achieve instructional change, whereas the conversational structure of TLC (e.g. questioning, listening and affirming language) has the potential to activate psychological states that underline adaptive and high-functioning teacher behavior.

The empirical findings were consistent with the hypotheses. TLC had positive relationships with teacher trust in principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality, with the strongest relationship being with teacher trust. Controlling conversation had negative relationships with teacher trust and autonomy, but it was not related in the path analysis to vitality. For each of the mental states, TLC had a stronger relationship compared with controlling conversation. Further, the effects of TLC were in the large to moderate range with trust ($\beta = 0.77$) and autonomy ($\beta = 0.37$) and the small range with vitality ($\beta = 0.26$). Empirical findings considered through SDT make three contributions to school leadership.

First, empirical findings support the assumption leading to the study that the purpose and structure of the principal-teacher conversation are important considerations for school principals. Controlling conversation and TLC derive from different assumptions about the social-psychological forces behind human behavior. Controlling conversation assumes that the power to enact change comes from sources external to the teachers. In this case, conversation makes expectations for teachers clear and holds teachers accountable to the standards and practices they are required to follow. In contrast, TLC assumes that the power behind change resides within the inner psychological resources of teachers, and the role of conversation is to activate these resources through sense-making and learning dialog (Adams et al., 2023). The conversational structures of questioning, listening and affirming language are social mechanisms that school principals can use with teachers to activate the psychological processes behind autonomous motivation and action.

When instructional change is the pursuit, school principals would seem better off leading with TLC than a controlling conversational approach. As seen in the results, an overreliance on controlling conversation had negative relationships with teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality. SDT suggests that controlling conversation regulates
behavior through social forces that constrain psychological resources that drive adaptive and high-functioning performance (Ryan and Deci, 2020). It is hard to envision teachers effectively navigating tensions and complexities in their classrooms without psychological resources leading the way. TLC is structured to nurture social and psychological resources supportive of change processes (Adams et al., 2023). There will be situations and circumstances when taking time to ask questions, listen deeply and use affirming language is not useful, but a general orientation to TLC seems more supportive of social and psychological drivers of instructional change than controlling conversation.

Second, the empirical evidence identifies leadership behaviors that have the potential to support teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy and teacher vitality. Research has established general leadership concepts as instrumental in the formation of these mental states (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Olsen, 2017), yet a distillation of specific behaviors associated with these mental states remains limited. At least in this study, asking rather than telling teachers what to do, listening to understand teacher experiences and affirming teacher capability had positive associations with trust, autonomy and vitality. With TLC, the type of questions asked matters, as does the quality of listening and affirming language. TLC is about using questions to elicit teacher sense-making and learning, both in terms of a teacher’s thoughts and awareness of social structures in their school and classroom. Listening requires being fully present with the person, not judging or evaluating and empathizing with their experiences. Affirming language expresses value and respect for teachers’ perspectives and experiences. This way of talking with teachers positions principals as colleagues interested in and committed to supporting their growth and development.

Third, TLC offers school leaders a simple framework to enter into sense-making and learning dialog with teachers. Education scholars have raised the merits of using dialog for leadership practice (Adams et al., 2019; Shields and Edwards, 2005), yet dialog remains limited in use (Gergen and Hersted, 2016). Isaacs (1999) points out that there are no prescribed steps that, if taken, will lead to dialog, but there are conditions that, when fostered, turn conversation into a sense-making and learning process. TLC is not likely to make dialog easy or simple to engage, nor would it want to, but it does present a clear, understandable and agile structure that directs leaders toward conversations that can be more dialogical rather than commanding and controlling. And, as seen in the findings, school principals use questioning, listening and affirming language with teachers to varying degrees.

In addition to the above claims, this study raises questions that, if pursued, can connect leadership research and practice. With a correlational design, the evidence in this study does not account for nuanced features of sense-making and learning dialog and how framing, questioning, listening and affirming language engage people in this discursive process. Questions to address the limitations of this study might include: How do school leaders understand dialog? What contextual and personal barriers exist to using TLC? Does training school leaders to use TLC foster greater individual and organizational learning? Does the use of TLC advance transformative work? How might TLC be used across different contexts and settings? What if communication strategies included conversation plans for how leaders might talk with people?

**Conclusion**

This study examined two contrasting conversation structures that school principals may use with teachers: controlling conversation and TLC. As reasoned out, controlling conversation may be suitable for simple, algorithmic tasks that involve following steps or protocols that align with an expected strategy or outcome. Conversely, TLC is suitable for dynamic, complex work and tasks that benefit from learning through actions and experiences. As predicted, TLC was a positive factor in teacher trust in the principal, teacher autonomy
and teacher vitality, whereas controlling conversation was associated with lower trust, autonomy and vitality. These findings imply that the inner workings of teacher mental states can be shaped by conversation patterns. Principal-teacher conversation can be supportive and nurturing of mental states that underline teacher thriving or constraining and thwarting, leading to the conclusion that leadership practice can benefit from greater awareness and inquiry into leadership conversation.

References


Further reading


Corresponding author
Curt Adams can be contacted at: curtadams@ou.edu