



European Journal of Educational Management

Volume 3, Issue 2, 51 - 65.

ISSN: 2642-2344

<https://www.eujem.com/>

Upgrading Downsizing: Ethics and Personnel Reductions in Declining Organizations

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Received: August 9, 2020 ▪ Revised: November 25, 2020 ▪ Accepted: December 15, 2020

Abstract: Decline and downsizing often create organizational conditions that are tension-filled, problematic, disruptive, and prone to unethical behaviour. It is common for educational organizations to face discontinuity of services and reduction of personnel; therefore, it is important to understand the relationship between declining organizations and the ethical behaviour of educational leaders under these circumstances. In this article, we provide a general description of organizational decline, typical responses to such decline, and highlight the phenomenon of personnel downsizing, with particular attention to the Canadian education context. We offer descriptions of various in situ strategies from several Canadian educational superintendents to illustrate implications for how we might better understand personnel reductions in relation to ethics. We conclude with suggestions concerning ways we might upgrade downsizing with wise judgment and ethical decision-making.

Keywords: *Organizational decline, downsizing, ethics, school leaders, Canada.*

To cite this article: Walker, K. D., & Kutsyuruba, B. (2020). Upgrading downsizing: Ethics and personnel reductions in declining organizations. *European Journal of Educational Management*, 3(2), 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eujem.3.2.51>

Introduction

The air is full of declining workforce rhetoric. Even further exacerbated by the COVID-19 context, economic uncertainty in on the rise in Canada (Thomson Reuters, 2019; Tombe, 2018) and around the world. We have heard this “talk” in many educational jurisdictions, and since the previous downturn in world economies (Economist, 2009) such “talk” has predictably increased. The fears and frustrations of those participating in educational venues, together with the disrupted dreams for secure work, coupled with the discontinuity of educational programs and services are evident more than ever in urban and rural Canada. Decline, as Cameron et al. (1987) suggested, occurs where there is “a substantial, absolute decrease in . . . resource base occurs over a specified period of time” (p. 224). More recently, views of organizational decline have moved beyond resources to include organizational characteristics and perceptions. Carmeli and Sheaffer (2009) defined organizational decline as “an organizational state of poor adaptability, consistently depleting resources, reduced legitimacy, and high vulnerability” (p. 364). The call for resilience in context of major changes, the cliché that we need to do more with less, the ongoing challenges and struggles to maintain quality services in the context of our current VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) era - this is the setting into which the concepts, illustrations and considerations contained in this article speak into. In this conceptual and descriptive article, we do provide a sampling of illustrations derived from a study of the ethical wrestlings of Canadian superintendents in the context of decline and downsizing, but our primary focus is on considerations and approaches that accentuate ethical framings that we believe upgrade our responses to declining workforce circumstances in education sector.

Secretan (1998) and other commentators discussed the reality of such approaches as involving restructuring, re-engineering, consolidation, amalgamation, down-sizing, right-sizing, and job-shifting responses to the decline of public finances and the turbulence of environments in all sectors. These factors threaten to alter, the number of employees within school jurisdictions and schools throughout Canada and all of North America. Organizational downsizing consists of “a set of activities that undertaken on the part of management, designed to improve organizational efficiency, productivity, and/or competitiveness. It represents a strategy that affects the size of the [organization]’s workforce and its work processes” (Cameron et al., 1993, p. 24). The reality of downsizing will often be tension-filled,

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uncertain and problematic or disruptive. The fear of impeding job loss and consequential job enlargement for survivors can be palpable to observers. As Etzioni (1998) and Lemke and Schminke (1991) suggested, in such circumstances of severe decline, opportunities emerge for unethical behaviours. Neves (2014) found increased levels of abusive supervision of non-confident employees in recently down-sized organizations compared with stable organizations. He argued that abusive supervisor behaviours towards workers can be triggered by work contexts that are characterized by high uncertainty and stress (e.g., where organizations are undergoing downsizing). Ultimately, he argued that downsizing processes open opportunities for unethical behaviour. Downsizing may contribute to unethical behaviours by interrupting social networks and reducing protective or supportive mechanisms (Shah, 2000); decreasing job security and causing employees to feel less agency (Armstrong-Stassen, 2002); and, decreased perceptions of control (Devine et al., 2003).

Post-downsizing psychological effects can last as long as six years in the surviving employees who remain in the organization (Moore et al., 2006); therefore, an ethical approach is not only important before and during a downsizing event, but also in the aftermath of the downsizing activity. For educational organizations this may be especially the case because these are complex and human resource intensive systems (Page, 2007); wherein linear, rationalized, lock-step decision making may not guarantee the desired outcomes and be seen as cold, calculated and heartless. At their best, schools operate as places of good will, with high value accorded to interpersonal and community relationships; downsizing disturbs these environments in ways that may wound and bring deep grief to school and school system ethos. Minimizing unethical behaviour during downsizing requires the capacity to judge and act wisely. In turn, this capacity involves more than simply following policies, procedures and processes but also entails an understanding of the ethical landscape one inhabits. For instance, Feldheim (2007) noted that public sector employees may assume a social contract for the delivery of quality services and view downsizing decisions to the public sector as a breach of this contract. There are also layers of tacit psychological contracts between and among educators and those who supervise them. Therefore, though we may not always be conscious of the ethical space or environment where educational work takes place, nonetheless, its impact on the perceptions and resulting actions of those who inhabit it are real and even profound.

While we are keenly aware of our physical environments and what they afford us to do, we are perhaps less aware and “sensitive to what we might call the moral or ethical environment ... the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live” (Blackburn, 2001, p. 1) and how these position us in the world. As surely as any physical environment affords us certain options, the moral and ethical environment also influences what we decide and how we act. Knowing more about what is involved in our moral and ethical environments, and how we might move through this landscape, is crucial to making wise decisions in contexts of downsizing and declining educational organizations. Educational leaders are faced with situations that challenge them to re-think the logistics of re-organization and the pursuit of increased efficiencies, but such circumstances and challenges also call upon leaders to consider organizational goals and values as well as their own values and ethical sensibilities.

If one looks for guidance as to what to decide and what to do in the experience of organizational decline, there are numerous studies in the public, non-profit, and private sectors which have explored the relationship between declining organizations and ethical behaviour (Lemke & Schminke, 1991; Etzioni, 1985; Ford, 1985; Fritzsche & Becker, 1984; Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Staw & Szwejkowski, 1975; Szwejkowski, 1985). Hopkins and Hopkins (1999) argued that two ethics-related issues arise with downsizing. The first concerns the moral obligation of leaders to act in the best interest of the organization; and second concerns the legal obligation of the organization to not violate the rights of employees. Also work has been done on organizational decline in the broader level of public service (Feldheim, 2007; Peretz, 2019), organizational management (Neves, 2014), and social work (Weinberg & Banks, 2019). As Carmeli and Scheaffer (2009) noted, while studies have investigated the moral issue associated with downsizing, little research attention has been directed to leaders’ behaviours during organizational decline and eventual downsizing decisions. In our view, there is a gap in the literature in the field of educational leadership with respect to organizational decline, downsizing and educational leaders’ roles and dispositions with respect to sustaining ethical integrity in these circumstances. This is problematic if one is seeking guidance for making wise and ethical decisions amidst the complexity and change that occurs with education organization decline.

Researchers might be encouraged to test the claims concerning the degree to which unethical behaviours occur or accept this claim and explore what may be involved in any increase propensity for unethical conduct. This implies a need for understanding what decisions and actions may be ethical but also calls for an interrogation of what it means for us to embody an ethic. In other words, the emergence of our embodiment as ethical beings or giving thought to what constitutes our ethicality amidst phenomena of change (such as in the circumstances of downsizing) and what this may mean for decision-makers in a worthy pursuit.

Acting on the latter response, this article provides a general description of organizational decline, typical responses to decline and highlights the phenomenon of personnel downsizing in the Canadian context. Also presented are descriptions of various strategies offered by several Canadian educational superintendents, with implications for how we might understand personnel reduction in relation to ethics. The reason for these educational leader perspectives is to provide some embodiment to what might otherwise be considered to be disembodied and idealistic perspectives on

the challenges associated with responding to decline through downsizing. Finally, some suggestions are offered concerning upgrading downsizing and what is entailed in attainment of wise and ethical judgment.

We offer this discussion even as we understand that amidst the complexity of downsizing a “foolproof-universal and unshakably founded – ethical code will never be found...an ethics that is universal and ‘objectively founded,’ is a practical impossibility; perhaps also an *oxymoron*, a contradiction in terms” (Bauman, 1993, p. 10), in the view of some. This is why woven through the more pragmatic descriptions and discussion of downsizing we consider the nature of ethics and provide some “on the ground” perspectives from superintendents. We weave together commentary concerning practice and philosophy together hoping that a consideration of individual moral and ethical sensibility and considerations of wisdom may help in prompting a more sophisticated and less cynical understanding of how we should act. We hope to nurture what a deeper understanding of what it means to deal with the apparent absolutes (or lack of same) and the complexity of relationship with others in the experience of downsizing, and of what is involved in making wise and ethical decisions. Readers might be well advised to forego absolutist considerations but, rather, to discern the application of universal or principled perspectives which might be usefully applied to particular circumstances and situated leadership decision-making.

Literature Review

Declining Organizations

Forty years ago, Whetten (1980) identified the neglect in research focused on understanding the phenomenon of organizational decline. He indicated that we tend to be “preoccupied with studying growth and its effects” (p. 577). We suggest the neglect remains relatively unattended. He further indicated that this emphasis on growth had been fostered by both a post WWII growth and by a prevalent set of values that had resisted negativity and denied turbulence and complexity. This emphasis is in transition if one is to believe writers such as Hawken et al. (1999) who suggested that we are in the throes of moving from an expansionistic socio-economic situation to one that is contracting to what might be a more sustainable circumstance. Certainly, these realities affect educational organizations which, through these last 40 years, have worked to focus on school effectiveness, improvement, reform, and, now, restructuring in response to larger socio-economic realities. As Secretan (1996, p. 9) noted “the theory of endless growth is illogical. The screws of corporate psychosis, dysfunction, stress and exhaustion can only be tightened so far. Eventually, human and corporate implosion occurs. It is simply not possible to keep growing at geometric rates forever.” He continued, suggesting we have become “chronic co-dependents on growth” (p. 12) and that this is corrosive to our souls.

In discussing ethics in the contemporary climate of social work, Weinberg and Banks (2019) characterized the ‘dark side’ trends of increasing managerialism and marketisation of services reflecting the appetite for constant growth. In tandem with cuts to the sector, they present an ethical dilemma; thus, they argued for “ethical resistance” that seeks ways to maintain codes of ethics amid the context of growth and resource paucity. There is an implication here that we need to move beyond considerations of educational organizations as businesses to be “managed” to create a “product” for some “consumer” in an ever increasing “market.” This perspective when acted on is, if not pathological, then is at the very least untenable. We suggest such realizations also alert us to the complex interrelationships existing within organizations and with the people who inhabit these organizations. And so practitioner-leaders are responsible for other human beings not just the organization, organizational processes and the roles we play in serving that organization.

Many, perhaps most, school systems, both rural and urban, have responded incrementally to decline through structural adjustments and strategic responses. About 45 years ago, Rodekohr (1974) identified the tendency in school districts experiencing shrinking enrollments to refuse to admit the decline. More recently, studies have noted that the primary fear of school districts during merging is loss of local autonomy and the ability to meaningfully connect with stakeholders as a result of an increased constituency (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; McCann, 2012). Whetten (1980) suggested that “the central issue in organizational decline is not whether managers are capable of managing decline, but instead, will they be willing to” (p. 580)? In the same place, he indicated that some organizations are faced with the challenge of having to “substantially reduce the scale of their operations, or redefine their outputs, in order to maintain their level of effectiveness.” According to turbulence theory, school downsizing would classify as an instance of severe to extreme turbulence, in which ‘business as usual’ thinking must be suspended (Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. 9). They continued, “those facing ethical dilemmas in the midst of busy organizational lives need to respond in a deeply reflective, systematic fashion as well as take into account the emotional context of decision making” (pp. 9-10). This makes it more difficult to be preoccupied with growth. It also raises the spectre of what is ethical as one carries out their roles and duties that inevitably affect others and that, because of this, requires the enactment of sound judgment that likely requires more from us than merely following rules, regulations or guideline.

There appears to have been societal shift of psyche in this regard—a shift from unequivocal optimism, to reluctant retrenchment and to knee-jerk re-engineering. Often school systems tend to be either in denial or they are over-responsive to decline. The over-responsive or bulimic school system will intermittently binge and purge personnel without thoughtful consideration and in effect demonstrate what is an irresponsible pattern of behaviour. In other

words, decision-makers' perceptions and judgments may be uninformed and somewhat insufficient in balancing out contending realities involved with making responsible or perhaps ethical decisions.

Downsizing

Economic pressures, taxpayers' reluctance to provide support, strategies to develop economies of size and declining student enrolment are often seen as the major culprits that require school systems to resize. As Navran (1995) indicated, it is difficult to calculate the actual and unanticipated costs (including psychological outcomes for those involved) of downsizing. Secretan (1998) reminded his readers that, "lean-and-mean organizations have lost elbow room along with their spirit and are therefore less able to inspire the remaining souls within" (p. 13). Some recent efforts by Andreeva and colleagues (2017) have offered the understanding that the psychological impacts of downsizing to employees, as well as the variance in this impact, is related to different approaches to downsizing:

- Where downsizing was "strategic" (meaning employees were re-trained and re-deployed) there was no increased risk of psychological ill health;
- Where downsizing was "reactive" (meaning layoffs were made) there was predictive of anxiety and depression, regardless of whether an employee was laid off or not.

Though from the private sector, this research is interesting as it presents an ethical call for creative downsizing efforts by demonstrating the differential downstream effects between approaches.

It may be difficult to determine where the "fat" in a school district is and even harder to avoid losing "muscle" when downsizing. Indeed, one might ask when relying on such a metaphor if a certain pathology lies within this reasoning because in biological systems each of these components (fat and muscle) are critical not only for the long-term wellbeing of an organism but for its very existence. A hallmark of robust adaptive systems of any type, educational or otherwise, is that there is always a degree of slippage where inefficiency exists that allow for adaptation and with human undertakings innovation and experimentation that otherwise would find no fertile ground (Axelrod & Cohen, 2001; Bednar, 2008; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Shapiro and Gross (2013) argued that at its heart, turbulence reflects a time of change. While past traumatic change can color perspectives toward current incidents, there is indeed the possibility that the change will open new opportunities.

One must beware of this "lean and mean" type of thinking for another reason. Often this thinking includes rationale without a full accounting of costs across the spectrum of economic, environmental, and societal factors across the longer term. In other words, this mindset often lacks sufficient sensibility about sustainability and the inter-relatedness of components and processes extramural to an organization's existence. Often accompanying this type of thinking is a view that downsizing is a rational and precise surgical "science," where one can simply apply the proper procedural techniques in order to reduce personnel. Such thinking denies the reality that educational systems are not clock-like "mechanisms" to be fixed but are complex emergent and ecological systems involving socially and politically diverse, connected, interdependent and adaptive factors (Page, 2007). As Lämsä and Takala (2000) noted that the development of empathy together with rational reasoning is important in cases of downsizing decisions. Similarly, Johnson (2017) argued that leaders that carry out layoffs can also learn from the experience by developing greater empathy for the feelings of followers. Given this, approaching the phenomena of downsizing as simply a Taylorian problem of efficiency solved through "objective" application of methods of *scientific management* (Taylor, 1967) is likely unwise, if not potentially unhelpful for persons or organizations. This approach is also shortsighted. But even accepting that perspective, managing by its nature involves judgment. Judgment is to a degree a subjective and intuitive human activity. Judgment concerning what is right, good and fair will possess some degree of variability and imprecision. If a narrow and limited concern for efficiency dominates decision-making, the long run outcomes may be detrimental. Realizing that decisions involve more than a lock step adherence to efficiency protocols. Rather, there is a need to understand, as fully as we can, the ethical landscape we inhabit, so as to make wise judgments and engage in more informed decisions to act.

In response to the nature of their work within the world of business, most Fortune 500 companies spend a great deal of time focusing their efforts on quality management. Of course, educational leaders are properly cautious of uncritically mimicking the practices of business sector but such approaches share several worthwhile and key characteristics, including: focusing on all the stakeholders affected by what the organization does; taking a holistic and systemic view to doing things; placing a great deal of emphasis on process as well as outcomes; deriving and driving decisions based on accurate information; and by having and applying a long term perspective. These appear as fairly basic and straightforward notions for any educational organization that is rightly seeking to be as effective and as efficient as possible.

Of course, downsizing is constituted by a number of concurrent strategies and tactics, each used to respond to the subtle and complex forces and demands of a situation. Several works (Gandolfi, 2013; Navran, 1995) have enumerated methods of categorizing downsizing strategies as focused on workers, jobs, units, performance or culture. We list them as variations on the downsizing theme:

1. *Restructuring* – Redesigning organizational arrangements by pinpointing the non-essential positions; including change in the relationships and roles within the organization. This approach tends to tinker subjectively and inexpensively with rescue problems;
2. *Re-engineering* – Focuses on a zero-base or a “ground-up” examination of the organization using mission statement and strategic planning techniques to redefine what work needs to be done, how and by whom. This approach is systematic and often uses external consultation. This approach tends to be idealistic;
3. *Right-sizing* – Puts a positive euphemistic spin on the reassessment of staffing requirements. Essentially the question is asked – do we have the right people and the right number of people in each of our schools? Collins (2001) popularized notion of “*getting the right people on the bus*” (implicitly getting the wrong people off the bus). This is determined by examining job assignments and by engaging in work analyses processes. The tendency in right-sizing is to ignore some voices, to underestimate human capital and to overlook critical review, based on both external forces and organizational mandate;
4. *Realignment and Attrition* – Realignment typically refers to “fixing” the reporting relationships, often in response to attrition. Attrition is the most common and most natural form of downsizing personnel resources. As people move on, superannuate or resign, their workload is taken up or absorbed by the remaining people;
5. *Consolidation, Centralization and Decentralization* – These three processes seek to relocate where work is done and how decisions are made (Navran, 1995). Consolidation “seeks to relocate which work is done . . . combines job functions in a common reporting relationship,” centralization “seeks to gain efficiencies by having separate functions share centralized staff support and direction,” and decentralization “seeks to make the organization more responsive and agile by placing support and decision-making responsibilities in the various sub-entities” (p. 19).
6. *Cutbacks and Layoffs* – Staff reductions through layoffs contrasts dramatically with natural attrition. Whether these actions are based on redundancy, program reduction or school closures, these are the most painful forms of downsizing in the short-term but tend to be the most beneficial long-term alternatives with respect to cost-saving strategies. These options are chosen over retraining and adapting the workforce to new jobs and realities. Sometimes the system lays workers off because there are no other meaningful places in the organization for them; and,
7. *Subcontracting and Job Shifting* – In situations where the work required is constant—it is possible to have this work done on a task-by-task basis by temporary or term workers. If in-house quality is not sacrificed and the extra costs of retraining and maintaining staff on a permanent basis can be reduced, this option receives some consideration. A variation on out-sourcing is to change the requirements concerning who is required to do certain tasks. For example, the use of teacher aides and teaching assistants in some educational venues has shifted the “need” to have all educative functions fulfilled by teachers. Another example is the use of parents (paid) to monitor school grounds or lunch periods at a lesser cost to system than if the traditional duties of teachers were to include this function.

From these approaches to personnel reduction some options may be seen to be more prone to intuitive judgments than others; or, as expressed by Bauman (1993), one may wish to become more alive to their moral sensibilities and capacities. While contextual, we suggest that one ethical imperative that would upgrade downsizing is grounded in the notion of exploring and acting upon the least harmful or least pathological alternatives. There can exist a “false trap of necessity” that urgently inclines decision makers to prematurely jump to decisions without considering other viable options. This is to be avoided through critical reflection on state of urgency and motivations of administrative convenience or mere expedience.

Feldheim (2007) discussed downsizing in public sectors specifically. A basic tenet of her article rests on evidence that public sector employees are more motivated by altruistic goals of helping others and less motivated by money than employees of other sectors (citations in the article support this). She argued that these employees envision a psychological contract between themselves and the government that they will work together for the public good. When downsizing moments occur then, these employees are uniquely hurt as they perceive their psychological contract for altruistic service has been violated. She reported downsizing as a continuum from economic perspectives (layoffs) to employee empowerment (decentralization). Her argument is that decentralization respectfully addresses the socioemotional components of employees and offers public servants agency in change (along the lines of the ‘strategic’ downsizing presented by Andreeva et al., 2017). As such, these employees feel less violated by a breach of the psychological contract between themselves and the government.

An identification of the pressures and problems that require downsizing decisions, the identification and evaluation of alternatives and the selection of the optimal alternative is important. How one defines the problem and how fully one can see the alternatives fitting into the particulars of a local situation is also important. School systems in decline need to consciously or overtly determine that their plans will be ethically robust and that they will act with integrity and sufficient mindfulness through all dilemmas that, unavoidably, will confront them in their decline.

Methodology

Research Goal

As indicated, we compliment this conceptual paper with a few insights from a larger study, the purpose of which was to examine perceptions of superintendents across Canada about the relationship of the new economy to their work and decision making. In this article, we offer a few descriptions of various strategies provided to us from Canadian educational superintendents, with implications for how we might understand personnel reduction in relation to ethics.

Sample and Data Collection

The study from which these illustrations are derived included a survey of 136 central office educational leaders (superintendents or assistant superintendents) from publicly funded (public and Catholic) school systems across Canada. Using purposive sampling, we selected 20 participants, all male superintendents, who had participated in two rounds of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to discover, explore, elaborate, and interpret their warrants used in ethical decision making. More than half of the interviewed superintendents represented smaller school systems, ranging from 10 to over 60 schools. In total, these 20 superintendents had over 5000 instructional staff and over 86000 students in their jurisdictions. Beginning in 2010, the study was conducted over a two-year period during which there were many amalgamations across Canada. Without a federal system of education, each of Canada's ten provinces has exclusive responsibility for K-12 education and their responses to economic and other factors varied in terms of timing and severity of sector contraction. The research team conducted these interviews mainly in the superintendents' offices. These interviews used open-ended questions to obtain from participants perceptions regarding various phenomena and understand how they made sense of their environment, issues, and events (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Several key interview questions served to prompt the responses that are used for this article: "What role did ethics play in your downsizing decisions?" and "What are the ethical non-negotiables when it comes to downsizing ethics?" As indicated earlier, the data presented are intended to be illustrative and demonstrate the embodied, practical and existential challenges of declining enrolments and downsizing through the reflective considerations of these chief educational officers.

Data Analysis

The data are derived from 40 (two rounds of 20) in-depth semi-structured interviews which were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Deductively, the interview data were grouped into four general ethical frames: teleological, deontological, relativistic, and reflectivistic. Inductively, themes emerged as participants enhanced and challenged the boundaries of these four ethical orientations by providing their own interpretations and expressions. Standard procedures for ensuring credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of qualitative data research were followed, including member checking and audit trail (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This article draws solely from the inductive theme of downsizing and presents these as illustrative examples as superintendents shared their perspectives and experiences with the researchers.

Findings

Superintendent Descriptions and Strategies for Downsizing

As one might expect, the responses of superintendents to declining organizations were varied. Most had moved past the "growing only" thinking and begun to appreciate that the stark and harsh reality that their organizations were actually in decline, with all of the ramifications of this status. In the brief section to follow, several expressions related to superintendent decisions about downsizing are provided. Within these we witnessed particular embodiments of ethicality that, in turn, provide some insight into the nature of ethics and as well as how these leaders enacted their responsibility in downsizing situations.

One Canadian superintendent when asked about the ethics of downsizing through amalgamation said:

It's tough. It's been disruptive. People in schools are on edge. They're afraid of their jobs and that they might not be able to do the new jobs with so much hype about technology. The reality that permeated the private sector in terms of there's no such thing as a safe job anymore has come into the public sector. People are afraid of losing their job, of being transferred, of their school being closed and it doesn't provide for a good work culture. One of the challenges in downsizing is to try not to have your people panic. How you keep your people motivated, in good spirits . . . I'm very reluctant to get into the doom and gloom kind of talk, when people ask me to speak... We're walking a tightrope of trying to have people face reality or do you keep reality away from them a bit . . . It's an ethical dilemma . . .

Superintendent sensitivity to the personal impact of school system amalgamation processes that had downsizing ramifications varied greatly. One superintendent indicated that,

The amalgamation process is the biggest priority right now because people are afraid. People here are under a lot of tension. The worse thing is I can't tell them because I don't even know. We're putting on a seminar during spring break for all our secretaries. It's on resume writing and interviewing skills. We have to keep information flowing to people. I try to stay upbeat and positive. Tell them, whatever happens, we're going to see that people get treated fairly . . . No matter what's going on, we've got a job to do and let's get on with it . . .

A superintendent from another province responded to the same question when he said that he did not have to worry about the ethics of personnel reductions because "it is done through union contracts." This and other superintendents expressed concern that all rational downsizing alternatives are virtually eliminated because of the documents derived from collective bargaining. Several superintendents indicated their view that management had given up too much to the employees in contract bargaining and were paralyzed with respect to responding to economic pressures in ways that would serve educational best interests.

Another superintendent used the metaphor of walking on thin ice when asked about the ethics of downsizing. As we seek to understand his comments and his working through downsizing decisions, we are reminded of the complexity and deep personal adjustments and rationalizations that occur. He said,

I'm walking on thin ice all the time . . . That's [sic] one thing that causes stress, if you think that everyone should like you. There [are] people who don't like you, no matter what you do, and a person should accept that. With the closure of one school, the board and I have had a good deal of personal suffering. At some point you have to make a decision and you have to live with the consequences and if you're not prepared to do, you probably shouldn't take part. You're not going to have 100 percent support all the time . . . You're not here to be loved.

Reflecting on the ethics of downsizing, one superintendent said,

Knowing in your head what's going on doesn't really help the stress that comes. Knowing the theory about change, uncertainty, and unpredictability in chaos in no way obliterates the feelings of betrayal and the let down . . . Someone said, it's not so much we're surprised by change but we're surprised about being surprised. I'm wiser now. Having gone through all that, I'm more humble, less arrogant. I'm less taken with notions of control. I have a better authentic understanding and appreciation of the limits of command and control in bureaucratic structures, a more intuitive understanding about the need to simply focus on the things you can influence and nudge. Disclosure of information that people have a right to know is important. I'd argue for greater sharing of the relevant information. Situations like this tend to bring out the worse in people . . . In order to survive, you tend to operate the same way. You lie to people. I've seen a lot of that. But at the same time, dealing with the uncertainty is the whole emotion of office politics . . . One of the things about [our life in this part of the world] is that conflict goes underground and has to do with a lot of people being either related or being neighbours. So, conflict is back-room stuff.

When a superintendent was asked "What are the ethical non-negotiables when it comes to downsizing ethics?" He responded, "You can't disrespect people. When you get some people coming in with some extreme points of view, it's important to listen to what they say."

Discussion

Avoiding Ethical Insufficiency, Sustaining Ethical Integrity

In sum, the words of these educators, appear to demonstrate that in the circumstance of downsizing administrators do not simply, and blindly, follow policy, rules or regulations even as they may embrace what are the usual deontological notions of responsibility (duty and role)—notions that persist in Western society as pre-dominant ways of construing responsibility and ethics. Existing within statements such as "we're going to see that people get treated fairly" or "whatever happens, we're going to see that people get treated fairly," is an attentiveness to others that involve, as one educational leader stated, "understanding and appreciation of the limits of command and control in bureaucratic structures, a more intuitive understanding about the need to simply focus on the things you can influence and nudge." This attentiveness is perhaps indicative of an underlying reality concerning their moral capacity as human beings, where there is a struggle through what are often ambiguous, unresolved and uncertain moments. This attentiveness is also a sign of wisdom. They are relying in part on their intuition, regardless of what may be thought of its fallibility; even as they call upon their intellectual reasoning and employment of guidelines, rules and policies in decision making. While finding a resolution is important in ethical terms the fact that people are uneasy, uncertain and questioning is perhaps itself a sign of their ethicality, that they are seeking to be ethical, to do the right thing, to be in a proper relationship with others. They are seeking to make a wise decision or at least to be wise in the process of downsizing.

This aspiration to make wise decisions may seem trivial but it is vitally important within the complexity world of an administrator's decision-making wherein one cannot be sure what outcomes will actually emerge. The struggle and tension that one experiences in being mindful of what potential outcomes may mean, not only for an organization but for individuals, is indicative of an ethic enlivened by one's moral sensibility; not just simply and unwittingly a myopic or unconsidered following of codes or regulations or a fulfilling of one's role.

As evident from these illustrative data, educational leaders communicated some strong value statements. Relying on philosophers such as Todd (2003, 2007, 2008) and Bauman (1993, 1995), we found that superintendents did follow policy, rules or regulations as guides to their ethical reasoning for downsizing decisions. At the same time, their statements indicate that even as we can be cautious about codes, rules, principles and roles we also need these. There are several value orientations that might be held as reference points when in the midst of tough decision-making processes and one example is provided by Navran (1995) who used the acronym EPIC to outline one set of downsizing considerations.

E = *Empathy* - caring about the consequences of your choices on others. Are you concerned with the overall effect of your decisions on those who have no say in the decision itself?

P = *Patience* - taking the time to make sure you understand the consequences of the choice before making that choice and acting upon it.

I = *Integrity* - making consistent choices in keeping with the declared values of your organization.

C = *Courage* - choosing to do the right thing even if the outcomes will not be to everyone's liking.

Shapiro and Gross (2013) proposed a three-step cyclical process to manage moments of turbulence (such as downsizing) which integrates turbulence theory and multiple ethical paradigms:

1. Consider the level of turbulence in the dilemma
2. Think through all the ethical paradigms. Which one informs your decision(s) best?
3. Consider how an action resulting from the paradigm(s) might affect the turbulence level.

Such guidelines are helpful for framing our thinking, but we are still left to wrestle with how we judge situations and if we are acting ethically. Is there more that can help us understand what is involved in making wise and ethical judgments?

The ethicality of decision-makers' actions can be partially judged on their abilities to weigh the factors, values and interests for and against the decisions they make (Southard, 1975, p. 84); but also, perhaps by their experience of not just "being-with" others but "being-for" them (Bauman, 1995). These actions have downstream effects to stakeholders, and their decision-making abilities are judged in part by real-life consequences to these stakeholders. Downsizing generates profound consequences in financial, organizational, and human resource realms (Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011). The collective ability of the management team to participate in open information exchange and produce collaboratively based solutions and decisions predicts, in part, the process and perceptions of organizational decline (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006). Where management teams can achieve these ideals, they ease the process for stakeholders. This involves decision-makers being sensitive to and seeking to safeguard and defend the unique difference and interests of others. In effect, decision-makers need to be committed to the holistic welfare of others; even as decisions may be made that initially seem counter or antithetical to their welfare.

If one is to act in an ethically sufficient manner, to maintain one's ethical integrity and sensibility, then perhaps a consideration of "being-for" others needs to foreground such questions as "What is right, what is good, and what is fair?" Considering what it means to "be-for" others may offer some insight into the ethical sufficiency of our actions and our integrity as embodiments of ethicality. Such questions are not frivolous and need to be considered. Despite the apparent cultural relativism and ethical distance that seem to exist as we operate in organizations with their roles and structures, Bauman (1993) suggested there may seem no universal ethical precepts only interpretations of our individual or group realities "we are irreplaceable as players of any of our many roles" (p. 19). This means we have to answer for ourselves and to others. We must be cautious of inclinations to turn from our objective responsibilities or ethical sensibilities; where we essentially hide behind rules, regulations or apparent cultural thresholds and values. In other words, our responsibility emerges from our embodiment as ethical beings and less so from the roles we enact or personas we assume. We need to understand how we exist ethically in the context of downsizing in order to upgrade our decision making (Walker & Donlevy, 2006). In what follows we offer a set of starting points for considering *what is right, what is good and what is fair*.

What is Right?

When one asks the question – What is the right thing to do with respect to downsizing? – there are at least three considerations: *rules, respect of persons and responsibility*. These concepts are related in the sense that a first order rule is that all persons should be respected, and individual and corporate responsibility must be assumed to provide for this rule-abiding respect. This is to say—it is the responsibility of each and every decision-maker to ensure, in every possible way, that the personal dignity, difference, and freedom of individuals and groups and stakeholders connected to the organization are guarded along with the collective or corporate integrity. In terms of individuals this involves enacting ways of "being-for" others not just "being-with" them (Bauman, 1993). What constitutes this being-for will be context specific; where one cannot "self plan, plot, design, calculate the passage from being-with to being-for" (Bauman,

1995, p. 52). This will also involve being attentive to the unique difference of others, attentive to one's own attentiveness or mindful of one's approach to others; while seeking a more pacific or non-oppressive relation with others. It is where others are "not merely heard, seen, or felt with, but where the self is receptive to the revelation of difference" (Bauman, 1993, p. 51). In this revelation no set of rules can safely guarantee that one is being responsible; however, these past "experiences" and knowledge of laws, rules and guidelines can inform one's enactments of being-for others.

It is obvious that various persons will be affected differently by the decisions that are made and implemented. Some will respond positively and be supportive of the action taken; while others will react quite differently, perhaps going through grief-like processes, with many different emotions coming to the forefront, both individually and corporately. There may be displays of denial (they can't be doing this to us!), anger, attempts at bargaining, resentment, hostility, and retaliation in various forms. There are other rules but the rule of respect for the person and respect for persons is perhaps paramount to making a right decision. The philosopher Immanuel Kant summarized this need to respect in his notion of the development of a Kingdom of Ends: We should strive to always treat people as ends rather than as means to ends. This obligation to treat other human beings as worthy of honour rather than as instruments of varied purposes. If kept in the foreground of one's considerations, this axiom provides some direction for the decision maker. Johnson (2017) used the example of a middle manager who learns of an upcoming merger that may result in company layoffs to describe how mismanaged information may harm employees (p. 14). If the manager is aware of employees making large financial decisions when that employee may be aware of impending layoffs, the manager is thrown into an ethical dilemma. For Johnson (2017), mismanagement of information is a shadow cast by a leader doing more harm than good. This need for enacting a respectful approach to others aligns with "being-for" others, in being open and vulnerable to the unique demands that come with attending to the very real presence of others (Bogert-O'Brien, 2000) not just for the constructed categories or "boxes" in which we tend to place others.

Buber suggested a similar attitude of mindful respect in discussing the need to approach others in an "I-Thou" relationship rather than an "I-It" relationship (Buber, 1970; 1972; 1958) the latter being one wherein we engage others more as objects than persons. There are the rules of the land (the laws), the rules of strategy and propriety. Rules tell us what we ought to do to be "in the right." They prescribe the laws, norms and standards in advance. Societies and organizations have rules that explain how things ought to be done. Hopefully, such rules reflect wisdom gained from experience, spelling out what others will tolerate, and some rules that we make for ourselves to keep "in line." The implication of the "what is right question" is that when deciding on implementation of downsizing the decision-makers must be satisfied that all human obligation and the constraints of pre-existing principles, precedents and precepts are recognized. However, even as we rely upon this Kantian inspired reliance on reason-dictated and rule-guided reason, we must keep in mind that these cannot replace the "deciders" as embodiments of ethicality, where we are responsible in "being-for" others. In other words, as Bauman suggested we cannot float our responsibility to others hiding behind rules, regulations or codes.

Choosing to do the right thing is not always easy. But the consequences of not doing so can be catastrophic. Not doing the right thing can easily lead to what is commonly referred to as "organizational down-cycling." Down-cycling is characteristic of those organizations who either cannot or refuse to deal with the hard issues of reality. In such moments organizations often fall into a long-term process where the organization becomes progressively more self-protective and turned inward, eventually losing its effectivity and vitality. If leaders think that problems will eventually take care of themselves without something being done to address them, then the symptoms of down-cycling will likely escalate. This can lead to greater inefficiencies, as well as to a growing sense of discontent and disaffection across the organization as a whole.

Several things can be done to minimize the ever-present dangers of down cycling. As noted by Everaert (1997, p. 282), keeping the following points in mind can be helpful here: Know your current position. Before heading off in any given direction know where you are presently. This means doing an honest assessment of your current situation. Benchmark your organization's achievements against those who are doing the same things that you are. The benchmarking process must be honest and realistic, based on what you are presently doing not against what you might be or should be doing. Also, be careful of comparing yourself with yourself. Resist the temptation of organizational navel gazing; instead, benchmark your long-term plan. Compare the goals of your organization to where you and others in your field will need to be in three or four years; and determine if your organization will continue to exist into the future if everything remains status quo. This means we might ask: If the status quo remains, will this be the most efficient way of doing things? Banks (2016) offered an outline of what he called "ethics work," or the cognitive and emotional processes involved in practicing ethics as a public service employee (his work was in relation to the field of social work, but the concepts map quite well onto schools). For Banks, ethics work entails:

- *Reason work*: making moral judgements and decisions; justifying judgments and decisions;
- *Role work*: playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant);
- *Emotion work*: being caring, compassionate, empathic; managing emotions;

- *Identity work*: working on one's ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; maintaining professional integrity;
- *Framing work*: identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts (reflexivity and criticality);
- *Relationship work*: engaging in dialogue; working on relationships;
- *Performance work*: making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work (accountability work).

Along with organizational considerations during downsizing, this could be an interesting framework for the ethical dimension.

While such guides may seem contrary to acting on the need of "being-for" others, we acknowledge that instrumental and procedural realities need to exist alongside our moral autonomy, or our embodiment as ethical beings and our ethicality. Even as we rely on rules and codes, there is the necessity of being mindful of one's approach to others; this, in turn, requires a broader and more sufficient understanding (or meta-cognitive comprehension) of the framing parameters of downsizing situations.

What is Good?

When one asks the question – What is the good thing to do with regard to downsizing? – there are at least two types of responses: The *character* of the anticipated decision and the *consequences* of that decision. In the first instance, the decision maker analyses all their actions and attitudes according to the ethical purity (absence of viciousness) and ethical integrity (presence of virtues). In other words, a downsizing decision that requires breaking a promise is ethically insufficient because good character demands promise-keeping. Downsizing decisions and their implementation must be honestly conveyed, without deceit and with candor. Truth-telling characterizes any good decision-making process. Decisions ought to reflect genuine care towards both those whose positions are redundant and those who continue to work with the organization. These are three examples that point to the requirement of manifesting virtue amidst downsizing decisions and doing so in a way that strives to be characterized as good. Second, ethically good downsizing decisions are those that consider both the short-term and the long-term consequences for individual stakeholders and the organization. Such decisions appreciate the often-fragile balance between the interests of the individual employee and the interests of the others (whether serving employers or children). In this instance, good decisions are those that move along a critical path, taking into account individual and corporate welfare. Good-focused decisions are prospective decisions that are judged by their consequences. Such downsizing decisions will weigh the short-term benefits and burdens with the long-term benefits and burdens, giving more weight to the long-term and sustained benefits and burdens. Good downsizing decisions are based on the quality of information and how this is used to arrive at a universal interpretation of the decision to be rendered. In other words, information upon which decisions are made ought to be available for examination and the method of interpretation and use of these data ought to be both clearly delineated as well as being derived from common sense understandings. Jeremy Bentham's (1907) approach to establishing consistent and universal criteria for estimating the relative impact of decisions was constituted by his recommended use of seven notions to ascertain the harm or good that might come as a consequence of a particular decision. The notions were intensity of good or harm experienced, duration of good or harm, certainty or uncertainty that good or harm would be experienced, propinquity (remoteness) of the decision to the actual good or harm, fecundity of good or harm resulting, purity of good or harm resulting and extent to which good or harm might be expected.

Pulling the above concepts together into a functioning whole will help to establish the direction that will need to be pursued once all concerns have been addressed. Before making any decision, various scenarios of possible outcomes should be anticipated. Also, it is prudent to develop scenarios of future states of what the organization might look like in the years to come. From these scenarios, a strategic plan can be developed that will shape the policies and practices that will affect the organizations ability to deal with future needs as they arise.

What is Fair?

When one asks the question – What is the fair thing to do with regard to downsizing? – there are at least three basic sets of consideration: *commercial fairness*, *remedial justice*, and *distributive justice*. These are expressions of what Aristotle called particular justice. He also proposed a universal justice that included consistent adherence to self-evident virtues and a law-abiding orientation on the part of the decision maker. Commercial fairness is a particular "kind" of justice that raises questions about the exchange of goods and services. This is a fairness that is undertaken by the decision maker who thinks about the compensation provided to those whose services are no longer required and compensating those who survive the downsizing initiatives. Compensatory justice involves giving people their due, according to particulars of the situation. When people are not provided with what is coming to them (whether in civilities or material compensation) then fairness is at risk. Remedial justice provides for mechanisms to weigh the

fairness or unfairness of a situation together with the degree of impartiality of a decision. Another important aspect of remedial or natural justice provides standards and means for setting an unjust situation right, to determine the fair compensation of those who have been wronged or “shorted” through decisions that have affected them.

Distributive justice is the goal that those who would work to apportion the benefits and goods (or burdens and difficulties) among people in a declining organization. While distributive justice is essentially a political act, those who strive to attain this category of justice work to provide equal treatment for equal persons and situations and an equal apportioning of burdens and benefits to unequal circumstances and persons.

In the determination of fairness in downsizing, most decision makers will appreciate that exact calculations are not feasible and that decisions are based on many factors, some more objectively determined or quantifiable than others. Looking at the downsizing issue through the lenses of justice and fairness, one can say that greater benefits for some do not justify injustices to others (Osipova, 2012). Because of the political nature of fairness-decisions, theoretical ideologies have an important place in defining fairness and avoiding solely expedience-based decision making.

Strategic restructuring decisions must be transparent, well defined, defensible, and taken for right, good and fair reasons. While there is a need to develop and implement a set of guiding principles as to what the organization will look like in the future, this management discipline must be applied to all management activity. Any downsizing initiative will have a tendency to magnify weaknesses in the management process. It is at this time that a leader must be cognizant of the interconnectedness of operational and management processes and their effect domino-like effect. For example, it is difficult to justify taking action based on financial constraints when waste and spending are unchecked and unjustified. If a consistent and defensible standard is not applied, then everything one does will become suspect by those who are being affected by the changes that are occurring.

Considerable attention has been given in the literature, and in practice, to equity in employment and deployment of personnel. Less focus on equity is featured in the reducing and dismissal activities of declining organizations. It might be argued that the same criteria and rationale used for equity decisions with new employees ought to be applied to reduction initiatives. It is beyond the scope of this article to rehearse the history, strategies and the plethora of uses and abuses of equity policies. Suffice to say, reflection on what constitutes equity provides leverage for working through the difficult tasks associated with personnel reductions. We should also remain mindful that what might be gained or the intended outcomes that might be realized when employing such canonical decision-making; with its focus on determining options, payouts and rational decision making, this approach may be suitable for less complex situations but are likely unsuitable for complex systems (Page, 2007).

Perhaps underlying each of these considerations concerning what is right, what is good and what is fair is the need to enact a non-oppressive interaction with others. In each case, this involves a truly communicative interaction; what Buber might call the third way; where others exist as an “I-Thou” even as they may be considered through their role or position as an “I-It” (Buber, 1970).

Enacting Ethical Complexity

The pragmatic decision maker will be skeptical of the previous section because there appears to be a naive, perhaps overly sanguine and idealistic, view that school realities are pure and simple rather than existing on a continuum of complexity. Our use of superintendent perspectives was an attempt to ameliorate this, but the skepticism is still respected. There are limitations to our enactments; ethics is much easier said than done. It is that complexity and immensity of decisions that elicit what are often the most trying situations. In the past, as Orlando (1999) noted, scholars generally failed to “appreciate the complexity of the issues that must be addressed in order to evaluate downsizing’s ethical status” (p. 296). Assuming a decision maker has the capacity to realize, rationally or intuitively, what are the right, good, and fair ways and means of downsizing, one still must consider that there are many competing values and interests that will not easily be resolved by platitudes of moral purpose and ideals of decision integrity driven by popular intentions. Given an awareness of diversity of persons, organizations and society, we ask, how does one deal with complex and conflicting values, in practical and defensible terms? For example, what does one do when the good is in conflict with the right or two good decision plans are at odds with each other? What about tragic dilemma wherein there is a choice to be made between the better of two negative alternatives.

In this brief section, we provide two of many possible responses to this appropriate set of concerns: the development of a dilemma breaking decision process and the appreciation of a sense of ethical hierarchialism.

The first need is for the decision maker to understand the differences that may exist between what might be considered to be ethical and non-ethical decisions; yet to do so in a way that the question is not so much about how to seek out what may be an ethical decision but rather how to be ethical in the dilemmas one encounters. Still, one could reflect upon if a decision plan embodies honesty and trustworthiness instead of deception, integrity and mindfulness instead of hypocrisy and closed mindedness, transparency and impartiality instead of opaqueness and prejudice, or caring and reverence instead of indolence and disrespect; and if not, then the plan should be ruled out even if it otherwise appears to accomplish what seem to be desirable economic or educational ends. Using means, in an unethical manner, to

accomplish entirely appropriate end values is simply, and obviously, not ethical. In order to differentiate the ethical from the non-ethical, a decision maker must be attentive in verifying their own values and articulate an ethical grid tool for the purposes of ethical problem solving. If the conflict is between two ethical values (and it certainly might be), then one can use a tie-breaking tool that uses the grids of consistency, consequences, circumstances, consideration and the conscience of virtuous character and the inherent virtue of an act. For example, one's grid may demand that to engage in a downsizing plan, the plan must meet the criteria of consistency (would I commend the same strategy to others in similar situations – a more universally justifiable approach – the categorical imperative)? The plan must be consequence sensitive (does the plan take into full account the stakeholder interests and concerns)? Do the circumstances warrant exceptional decision-making (are the plans envisioned appropriate and contextually sensitive)? Finally, one might ponder if they were one of the people directly or indirectly affected by this downsizing situation, what would be my most pressing consideration and what would I do? In other words, one might ask: Is there anything about this decision that goes against what I believe or that would give someone (perhaps a person affected by my decisions) a poor view of me as a decision maker?

A second approach to ethical conflicts is to assume the premise that some things are more important than others. In other words, all values and objects of value have to be weighed and this weighing will accord certain evaluative status to alternative plans. For example, it may be said that persons are more valued than things. People are to be cared for and one manipulates things but not persons. Other premises for consideration might be that: actual situations are more valuable and pertinent in decision making than hypothetical situations, the welfare of many persons is more valuable than that of fewer persons and personal acts that acknowledge and enhance the unique presence of other human beings are better than those which do not. Taken together, these two conflict-resolving frameworks may provide some direction that will help with the logjams of ethical complexity.

Recommendations

Phronesis as Embodying Ethical Wisdom

Now then, where do all of these discussions leave us in terms of practical implications for the concepts presented? Leaders face the reality that many workforce reductions are unavoidable (Gandolfi & Littler, 2012). We go back to the founding motive for this article, provided by Denhardt (1993), who indicated the shifts in approaches to public management (including educational sector) that have sought to meet the varied and complex demands which we continue to witness. As Denhardt (1993, p. 16) explained:

There are several basic ideas that seem destined to replace the tenets of rationalism and managerialism that have so long dominated how decision-makers proceed. Together these ideas represent a dramatic change from the logical and detached, impersonal and control-oriented management . . . the most progressive managers of today and tomorrow will emphasize creativity and innovation, empathy and understanding. They will move away from a focus on structure and toward a focus on values, away from the notions of control and domination and toward participation and involvement, away from rule-bound conformity and toward a sense of community, away from a preoccupation with the internal and toward a better understanding of those outside, away from rigidity and toward adaptability, and away from a pretension of value-neutrality and toward high standards of ethics and morality.

Denhardt suggested that the “chief skill of the manager, though one rarely addressed by theory, is that of intervening at just the right time, with just the right content, supported by just the right values” (p. 25). He said that those in the public trust must have the capacity to sort through complex and conflicting political pressures and ambiguities when unexpected opportunities present themselves (integrity amidst pragmatic incrementalism). What this suggests to us is that our ethicality involves wisdom. We propose the use of *phronesis*, a Greek term that means ‘practical wisdom’ which has been derived from learning and evidence of practical things. *Phronesis* as a phenomenon leads to breakthrough thinking and creativity and enables leaders to discern and make good judgements about what is the right thing to do in a situation.

In our view, wisdom involves the need to remain aware and sensitive to our existence as moral beings who should beware of floating our responsibility (Bauman, 1993) behind organization rules and procedures. This wisdom involves an understanding that “no abstract rule, no universal commandment possessing concrete content can relieve us of the burden and the responsibility of our acts ... every ethical rule can be applied only in particular circumstances and that each rule therefore also depends upon an exercise of *phronesis* that may even lead to the transgression of the rule” (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 114). This *phronesis*, as Castoriadis noted, involves the “capacity or power to judge at the very place where no mechanical, objectifiable rules that would facilitate judgment can be found” (p. 114).

Phronesis in the context of the ethical upgrading of downsizing brings, as Dowie suggested, “reflection to bear upon the appropriate action to take, depending on the concrete circumstance. The reflection involved is entirely specific to the situation rather than the unthinking application of some formulaic approach” (2000, p. 241). The exercise of *phronesis* of theoretical and practical wisdom goes beyond mere expediency and rule following, relying upon “factual and

procedural expertise, an understanding of context, a sense for the relative and for uncertainty, an ability to learn from experience and to reason, and a sensitivity to the needs of others" (Limas & Hansson, 2004, p. 100).

In the complexity of downsizing, where crucial decisions are made about the future of others and organizations, there is a co-determination involved and active, attentive and thoughtful approach to people, their interests, and their dignity are required. This involves an acknowledgement and reliance upon established protocols, processes, rules, roles and the like, but also a realization that "the main type of relationship in all spheres of human vital functioning is the "subject-subject" relationship" (Kotovska, 2006, p. 108). Acknowledging this reality is perhaps where finally we gain a sense of how we might ethically upgrade the reality and inevitable experiences of downsizing in our educational organizations.

Conclusions

In this article, we have provided a brief overview of the downsizing phenomenon and some background and insight regarding ethics. We began by introducing the challenge of acting ethically amidst the decision-making of downsizing in the education sector, as well as the need for importance of diligent thinking and deciding to meet these challenges. We outlined some of the larger societal forces and attitudes that frame decisions concerning downsizing; where, for example, people default into only economic and rule-keeping considerations and where there is a belief that decision-making is entirely a rational and objective undertaking involving little or no judgment, and where only minimal consideration is given to ethical insights and integrity issues. We have claimed that this is an insufficient view. In brief fashion, we provided illustrations of some educational leaders' perspectives and used their insights to embody some of the ethical wrestlings and approaches to downsizing decision processes. We offered some discussion regarding what is in play as a part of decision-making in relation to downsizing and we have offered some pragmatic considerations. While discussing what may be right, good and fair we attempted to broaden the discussion to offer some insight into the nature of ethics and the place of practical wisdom. We suggest that what is ethical is embodied within in us, our ethicality. In other words, what is crucial to decision making is acknowledging and acting on our moral capacity as human beings as we face the challenge of enacting our role as educational decision-makers in difficult downsizing and declining organizational circumstances.

Limitations

This paper provides readers with conceptual and ethical considerations to guide decisions in circumstances of decline and downsizing. However, each context requires its own set of attentions and application of wisdom. Application of ideals is a tricky business. Knowing what the good, right, and fair decision is can often be hampered by variables that are beyond educational leaders' control. Downsizing decisions are complex. Limitations imposed by exogenous economic and political constraints will moderate or dictate some decisions. Unbridled propensities to favour expedience, efficiency, and short-term exigencies, without considering intermediate and longer-term human system implications may be easier but not ethical. The principled framing of circumstances and commended actions illustrated and expounded in this paper will also be limited by the thresholds of agent's (leader's) consciousness of challenges, dialogical competence, wise adjudication of conflicting ethical commitments and quotient of moral courage.

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