Collaborative Leadership

Activate, Influence, and Elevate

An interdependent vision can be realized only through collaborative action, so relationships at work become central" (Senge, 1994). This quote from Senge's *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* reminds me of the importance of collaboration and positive relationships with a team. I believe in collaboration and building trusting relationships, but in March 2020, COVID-19 challenged these educational beliefs.

The March 2020 initial planning meetings with my administrative team proved daunting and frustrating because of the pandemic. The team and I had many questions: *Where do we start? How is this going to work? How do we support teachers? How do we support students emotionally and academically? How will we adjust the ways we communicate with parents?* We faced an unexpected challenge, and I, for one, felt unprepared.

During the days of the pandemic that followed school closure, colleagues would frequently say, "We didn't go to

graduate school to learn how to lead in a pandemic!" Again and again, I would hear similar complaints from them, sometimes in jest, other times in anger or frustration. Gradually, their words affected my mindset. I felt my situation was hopeless.

Throughout the day, questions bombarded my mind: *How could I support teachers and students? How could I keep our culture alive? How could I assure families we'd find ways to work with them and their children?* I felt that I couldn't tackle these changes alone or even with the help of my administrative team. However, the answer came to me when I was exercising on my stationary bike, a place where I think, gain clarity, and at times find answers to my questions. The answer was simple and clear. Source my teacher's expertise.

The next day I told my administrative team, "I have the answer. I understand how virtual learning can work! Here's what we're going to do. I'll begin the conversation in a video meeting with staff this way, 'I don't know a path forward; I don't have answers.'" I received perplexed looks, and as I started to explain, interruptions stalled my explanation.

"Evan, your great idea is you don't know what to do?"

I leaned back on my chair, "Yep, that's correct. We have smart teachers. If together, we source the expertise in our faculty, I'm certain that we can find a pathway."

The next day during our meeting, I activated teachers' thinking by inviting them to generate suggestions to support all of us as we moved rapidly from in-person to virtual learning. My administrative team and I spoke about our faculty's strength and how their ideas could influence developing guidelines to support each other as never before. I explained that I did not have the answers, and that

like them, I worried about the uncertainty ahead. However, finding realistic solutions was my goal. I shared stories of how we, as a school, had always been innovative and creative and reminded teachers that I had faith that they were up to the pandemic's challenges. I scheduled a series of daily meetings with all the teachers and administrators to discuss the next steps. I closed the meeting by reiterating that our commitment as a community was to safety, students, and staff.

Over several meetings, a collaborative leadership team of grade-level team leaders and department chairs emerged. By working together, we learned about each other, grew closer, and created a virtual learning plan to positively impact teachers, staff, students, and families. Each meeting closed with my elevating and praising their efforts and thinking because they always showed me they were up to the task of meeting every challenge. I believed this, and over time they did, too.

Optimism is an important part of leadership and to maintain hope, I explained that the brightest, most able scientists in the world would be working together on a vaccine that would change our present situation. As I write this chapter, the world is vaccinating people at a level never before imagined.

Collaboration enables teams to tackle unexpected challenges head-on! Living through COVID-19 highlighted seven lessons I learned.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Source your team by tapping into each person's expertise and strength.

- Focus on your vision and goals as supports for making tough decisions.

- Search for ways to work with your leadership team and staff to find solutions. It is okay not to know the answers, and this should be the catalyst for collaboration.

- Flatten your organization and give everyone an opportunity to contribute as well as empower leadership.

- Build trusting relationships when working collaboratively to solve challenges.

- Believe in your team and always let them know why.

- Choose optimism, keep hope alive, and communicate that with teamwork better days are ahead.

The seven lessons strengthen collaboration and enable groups to risk sharing all ideas in order to prioritize those they feel might work.

COLLABORATION BUILDS COMMITMENT TO POSITIVE CHANGE

Collaboration encourages conversations that can lead to pedagogical change, allowing teachers' input to impact their instructional growth, your school's curriculum, and students' learning (Spillane et al., 2004). Moreover, the impact on students' learning and teacher growth benefits your school now and into the future because effective collaboration increases teachers' ownership of curricula changes and adjustments and also boosts their continual investment. You don't need to know all the answers, but by

collaborating with your faculty, you will see that possible solutions to challenges will arise.

As the principal, you have the role of shaping the discussion, guiding your faculty, and creating the conditions for collaboration to occur (Mendel et al., 2002). This style of leadership allows you to be an active participant in decisions and to model the collaboration you would like at teacher and staff meetings and among students and teachers. I've developed five characteristics of effective collaborative leadership for you and your administrative team to reflect on and discuss.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COLLABORATORS

A purposeful goal to set is that you and your team continually model these traits during daily interactions with staff, students, and parents, allowing all stakeholders to experience them and ultimately include them as they interact with school community members.

1. **Be action-oriented:** Model that you view collaborating with staff to discuss problems and challenges as opportunities for teamwork that explores and discovers solutions.

2. **Be inclusive:** Seek opportunities to involve others in decisions to increase ownership and to demonstrate a commitment to a shared process.

3. **Show your beliefs:** Always communicate through your words and actions how much you value optimism, hope, and high expectations for students and staff.

4. **Strive to be a servant leader:** Every day show your commitment and dedication to members of your

school community by listening, increasing their self-confidence, and finding ways to support them.

5. **Cultivate patience:** By offering teachers and staff time to understand changes, challenges, and school initiatives, you model that growth is a process and not an event. Be an active listener who values and reflects on feedback from staff and students.

When your faculty observes, hears, and experiences you exhibiting the five characteristics of effective collaborators, your school culture can begin to shift to an increased focus on teaching and learning. As you consider being more collaborative to increase learning gains for all students in your school, remember that part of leadership is projecting your beliefs and being sincere. Remember, if the faculty perceives your actions or words as insincere, you cannot be effective.

LEADERSHIP TIP

How you work with your faculty will build bridges or walls. Be genuine, seek collaborative opportunities, and strive to have congruency between your words and actions. To lead the change, you need to model and be the change!

SEVEN CONDITIONS THAT FOSTER COLLABORATION

To collaborate with teachers and develop the shifts and changes that can lead to learning gains for every student,

you'll want to continually assess whether the seven conditions that foster collaboration in your school are thriving. As you evaluate your schools' collaborative temperature, you'll find that teachers may be involved in some or all of the conditions that follow—your purpose is to strengthen each one through conversations, mentoring, modeling, and shining the spotlight on conditions that are flourishing in order to encourage all staff to embrace and lean into each one (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

1. **Agency:** Initiate and seek opportunities to learn more about instruction and learning.

2. **Risk taking:** Intentionally build a community that values collaboration and trusting relationships, so that staff take risks and try new methods without the fear of administrative reprisal or personal failure. Help staff know that failures are opportunities to learn and improve.

3. **Positive interactions:** Encourage teamwork to generate ideas and problem-solve, as such interactions can improve professional agency, enhance trusting relationships, and boost staff morale.

4. **Advocacy:** When you build trust and relationships, you empower staff to have a voice, and advocacy increases. Be the leader who encourages teachers to be advocates for their students' needs, professional learning opportunities, curricula adjustments, classroom libraries, updating materials, and so on.

5. **School improvement:** Show staff how much you value their contributions, suggestions, feedback, and respect their voices, by noticing and noting what they do and say in a conversation or email. Staff that feels appreciated will more likely engage in school improvement and commit to important initiatives.

6. **Communication:** You can model timely communication by responding to staff's queries within 24 hours as well as create short videos for parents that celebrate teachers' efforts and students' progress. As you model the importance of communication, teachers will find effective ways to communicate with students and families.

7. **Networking:** Empower teachers and staff to network within and beyond their school community through social media and by arranging meetings to share ideas. You'll not only enhance learning and professionalism, but you can also strengthen self-efficacy as teachers and staff share literacy and numeracy stories with other educators and deepen their understanding of how and why they can impact students' learning.

A strong, focused collaborative faculty can accomplish the challenges of returning schools to a new normal, post-pandemic and beyond. Moreover, when instruction that supports learning gains for every student is a foundational belief, then monitoring students' progress becomes the way to support learners. A collaborative model allows you to become a learner among learners, creating opportunities for you to be involved and visible with instruction, curriculum, assessment, and professional learning as you model the behaviors needed for progress and success. Even though you work toward having your entire staff embrace instructional changes such as differentiation and blended learning, there will be resisters. Avoid ignoring them and hoping that they join the majority. Instead, listen to their objections, encourage them to read and discuss informative articles and watch videos, and suggest they pair up with a colleague for additional conversations. You can't force them to change, but

you can create learning opportunities that can cause them to rethink their views.

As the principal, you influence the collaborative conditions in your school more than any other staff member. The seven conditions plus your encouragement can empower faculty to develop and lobby for leadership roles and bring substantive changes to instruction that elevates and honors students' progress with literacy and numeracy.

INTRODUCING SHARED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

To maintain the collaborative spirit you've developed and extend it to teacher leadership opportunities, you can call for volunteers to fill leadership roles you've identified, or you can encourage teachers to develop leadership roles based on specific, observable needs. It will take time to build a culture of shared instructional leadership and help staff view such roles as opportunities for growth instead of "more work."

Start conversations at team and department meetings and invite teachers to find articles on shared instructional leadership using a search engine and share them with colleagues and administrators. Once discussions of these articles begin, it's important for you to attend meetings, so you can gauge where teachers are with taking on leadership responsibilities, developing protocols for gaining approval, and communicating progress with you.

Steadily improving all students' gains in literacy and numeracy should be a primary goal of sharing instructional leadership.

GETTING STARTED WITH SHARED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The focus of teacher leadership opportunities is to identify the needs of all students as they return to school and then determine the instructional moves and data that can lead to steady progress for each one. You can organize volunteers into cross-grade-level teams to explore a topic as well as find professional articles, books, and videos for study to increase teachers' understandings. You'll need to establish guidelines for the process with teachers, so you and your administrative team remain in the loop as the process moves forward:

- **Approving the topic:** This will occur when you and faculty collaborate and choose two to three topics to pursue.

- **Researching available materials:** The shared leadership team finds resources such as online professional articles, excerpts from books, and YouTube videos that can increase administrators' and teachers' knowledge of a specific topic.

- **Scheduling meetings, reading, and discussing:** The leadership team submits a schedule for meeting with an administrator to the principal for approval.

- **Sharing recommendations:** These can be shared with all staff and administrators in a shared folder the leadership team creates.

- **Moving to actionable steps:** Once the staff has read the recommendations, there should be collaborative discussions to evaluate the recommendations and explore costs for materials as well as teachers' reactions.

It's important that someone in the teacher leadership team jot down notes of key discussion points and recommendations in a shared computer folder. This allows members who attended the meetings to review and adjust their notes, but it also keeps you, faculty, and staff abreast of what's happening as long as the shared folder is accessible to everyone.

MOVING FORWARD WITH SHARED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The list of possible topics that follows won't be implemented in one school year. Again, through collaborative discussions, decide on two to three areas of shared instructional leadership to work on—areas that everyone agrees will result in improved teaching and learning. You can invite teachers to add a new topic after one has been successfully implemented.

Review, reflect on, and collaboratively discuss the shared instructional leadership suggestions that follow and select two topics you and teachers believe are high priorities for your school. Since the list that follows is not exhaustive, your team might decide on other topics such as grading because they believe that when students receive low grades, their self-confidence and desire to work diminish and become roadblocks to improvement. Remember, the purpose of shared leadership initiatives relates to the overarching goal of this book: increasing *all* students' learning gains.

- **Develop culturally relevant and responsive teaching,** a research-based approach that invites teachers to make connections between students' learning in school and their cultures, languages, family traditions, and experiences. Connections engage students with

the curriculum and bring relevance to materials and tasks.

- **Move to a student-centered approach** that includes students' choices and collaborative discussions and projects to motivate and engage students in meaningful work.

- **Focus on access and equity** to meet all students' learning needs by ensuring there are books and materials that meet the diverse learning levels in classes as well as classroom libraries with culturally relevant books students can see themselves in as well as use them to learn about other cultures and lifestyles.

- **Use assessments to guide instruction** so that teachers continually monitor students' progress to support them as well as make teaching and learning decisions.

- **Acting as advocates for students' needs** invites teachers to lobby for students who require additional support or a series of interventions to improve.

- **Make independent reading happen** by helping faculty understand how daily reading of self-selected books is the practice students need to improve their skill. Also important is to investigate teachers' schedules to ensure that independent reading can occur when classes meet.

- **Integrate station learning,** a strategy that allows teachers to differentiate by supporting a group of students who require additional practice in English Language Arts classes and other content subjects. while others work at enrichment or reinforcement stations. This type of differentiated scaffolding and support can be used by teachers from kindergarten to Grade 12.

- **Embrace differentiation** to find ways to help children at different instructional reading levels actively learn from materials they can read. Teachers also adjust process and expectations and what students create to demonstrate learning.

- **Mentor new teachers** to reduce stress, and have new teachers regularly meet with a mentor throughout the year to acclimate them to the school's culture, expectations for teachers, deadline dates for reports, and so on. In other words, by reducing the stress created by not knowing and making mistakes, new teachers can focus their energy on instruction and students' learning.

- **Consider personalized learning** by developing learning experiences for individuals tailored specifically for their needs and providing choices for students among a set of activities. Personalized learning builds on students' strengths and can enable learners to meet goals.

- **Use choice boards** to enhance students' engagement and motivation to learn by offering them a choice of activities to boost their learning of a concept, applying a strategy, or solving problems.

As you encourage staff to collaborate to select, research, and then put into action shared instructional leadership projects that matter to your school's teaching and learning, students will experience success.

RETURNING TO A NORMAL SCHOOL DAY

As your school returns to a normal day, it's vital for you to work with your faculty and staff to focus on culture building, instruction, learning, and elevating your faculty's

capacity to influence children's learning. Being specific and targeted is the way to move ahead. Many schools had a halt to professional development during the pandemic. At times, a lull in professional growth can encourage staff to revert to prior methods that may be comforting during a turbulent time but may not be effective for students.

When your school reopens, you have a professional responsibility to refocus instruction and students' learning and growth. The most significant influence on students' learning progress is highly expert, inspired, passionate teachers and school leaders working to maximize the learning gains of all students in their care (Hattie, 2015). You have the key role in helping your faculty find and harness their energy, passion, and drive for supporting all students. The five tips that follow can help you focus priorities and initiatives and can increase the likelihood of success for you, your faculty, and students.

SUCCESS TIPS YOU CAN CONTROL

Collaborate with teachers and discuss the tips that follow so they understand the thinking behind your recommendations.

- **Start small** and avoid overwhelming yourself and teachers.
- **Communicate** to your faculty frequently and with specific purposes and information.
- **Form partnerships** by collaborating with your faculty and staff.
- **Choose optimism** and emphasize what's working.
- **Cultivate and model collective efficacy** so your entire school community believes that with hard work everyone can move forward.

Harnessing the intellect on your faculty and staff, collaborating, and then empowering them to lead can help you meet the challenges of leading when students return to school after the pandemic and beyond. Collaborations, partnerships, and school-focused initiatives can sustain learning over time as you focus everyone on long-term gains instead of short-term quick fixes.

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HYBRID/VIRTUAL TIPS

Leadership can exist and thrive virtually or with a hybrid school schedule.

Communication

Always essential and even more so if disconnected from staff.

Tip: Arrange scheduled opportunities to speak with your entire staff and groups, such as grade-level teams and departments. Work with teams and departments to establish scheduled meetings focused on students and their progress as well as sharing ideas and interventions to meet the needs of striving readers.

Collaboration

Virtual leadership and teaching can be great opportunities for collaboration.

Tip: Use video meetings on your platform of choice to collaborate and problem-solve with your team. Set the purpose of meeting,

encourage discussion, value ideas, and demonstrate how the collaboration you and your team are doing is making a difference.

Teachers' Roles

Empower teachers to have leadership opportunities in a virtual environment.

Tip: The collaboratively developed initiatives for your school are leadership opportunities for staff. Empower staff to create goals based on your school's initiatives and to share updates on successes and challenges.

As you and teachers collaborate to develop shared instructional leadership opportunities, expect a few failures and/or less-than-stellar results. When you view these as opportunities to learn and try again, you send a powerful message to staff, teachers, and students: taking risks can result in failures, and that's okay as long as you see failures as information to help teaching and learning improve and revise plans so that progress occurs. Much of what I have communicated to you centers on your role to model and change. Here's the message to communicate: there is no shame in failing as long as you use failures to learn and then redirect your efforts toward success.

CONSIDER THESE ACTIONS AND AIM HIGH

- Meet with staff to review present schoolwide initiatives and suggest one to two new ones to explore.
- Collaborate with faculty and staff and determine one to two initiatives that would improve instruction and students' learning.

- Invite faculty and staff to collaborate and develop a set of shared instructional leadership possibilities. Then, collaborate with groups to explore shared leadership ideas that can enable all students to make significant learning gains.

- Create a cross-grade-level team to look at professional learning that reflects teachers' needs and desire to grow. Then, collaborate with faculty to set priorities and decide which ideas teacher leaders could develop and help implement.

- Examine the level of risk taking you and your administrative team encourage among staff to identify ways to encourage staff to try new instructional practices.

- Invite grade-level teams to collaborate and examine your communication with all school community stakeholders and then create a list of recommendations for you to review and discuss further.

- Reflect on how you positively impact your school's climate, culture, and the professional attitude of teachers and then jot down areas that affect student learning—areas you believe require more attention. Implement them and gather feedback from teachers as you place students' progress at the center of your agenda.

- Notice whether teachers are taking risks by trying new instructional practices that reach and improve all learners. Always assure faculty that it's okay for a lesson not to work when they first use it, but that you want them to view missing the mark or failing as an opportunity to learn and try again.

Closing Reminder

Maintaining a collaborative school environment ensures that you and staff are a team working on students' progress, curricula changes and adjustments, and shared leadership through communication that values your team's input and feedback.