

Leadership for Collaboration and Change

Fern Aefsky, Ed.D

Saint Leo University
Director of Education
University Campus MC2005

Jodi Lamb, Ph.D.

Associate Director of Education
Saint Leo University
University Campus MC2005
PO Box 665
Saint Leo

Renee Sedlack, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor Education
Saint Leo University
University Campus MC2005
Saint Leo

Abstract

Leadership, change and succession is a topic of discussion and concern by practitioners in schools. Leadership needs are evident in every school and district across the United States, as many educators are choosing to avoid a move to school and district leadership positions.

Understanding leadership needs and the characteristics of successful leaders may assist educators in dealing with the challenges of leaders in schools. A leadership approach that creates collaborative practices enables the sustenance of building capacity of leadership programs and people, with mentoring and resource support for success. Partnerships enable the creation of successful team approach to collaborative leadership. Skills are developed, maintained and sustained by collaborative leaders, as the isolation that previously existed when describing a leader is minimalized. Faculty and staff members who are in a collaborative leadership environment are more likely to see the levels of support from stakeholders, and are encouraged by the team effort. This enables those faculty and staff members to experience how a collaborative approach to leadership benefits all members of the school community. Leadership transcends across cultures. Idea Watch (Harvard Business Review, May 2015) reported that in various countries across the globe, leaders build and sustain relationships, increase team capacity, recognize the values and structures of organizations, focus on goal and mission alignment and purpose. All are critical aspects of leadership development. Global leadership competencies for various educational positions have been identified in various studies (Goodman, 2012; Litz, 2011; Terrell, 2011; Sullivan, 2011). Key competencies included vision, integrity, content knowledge, confidence, decision-making, and an understanding of organizational systems, problem solving, operational management, and commitment. Good leaders know when to share power and authority and when decisions must be made. Values and ethics of leadership define the interactions between leaders and those they influence (Aefsky, 2015).

Literature supports multiple types of leadership, including distributive, hierarchal, transformational, transactional, and autocratic or bureaucratic leadership (Barsh & Lavoie, 2014; Hewer son, 2015; Maxwell, 2013). Leadership is often defined as a process of influencing how others think or act and the consequences of those results. It should not matter what type of organization a leader is part of when you think about characteristics that make that person a great leader. For example, what did you experience or observe that would make you think he or she was a great leader?

Did that leader lead by example, dictate what needed to be done, take responsibility for actions, take credit, share credit, or blame others? A great leader does not govern by a single variable. Situations require different leadership actions. Regardless of the type of organization, leaders are needed to make things happen, facilitating change, accomplishment of organizational goals, and developing members of their organization into leadership roles. Think about great leaders in education, organizations, and government that you may have heard about, observed, or experienced. According to Schmoker, Jim Collins stated that "leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts are confronted" (Schmoker, 2006, p. i). Lencioni (2012) said, "when there is trust, conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer" (p. 38). So, a leader who is trying to bring about change and create a healthy organization must build trust and then be willing to have difficult conversations where members can openly examine practices and determine what is right for the organization and aligned with strategic anchors. By combining efforts in the area of organizational health, a leader can truly foster positive change.

Building leadership teams inclusive of all levels of management, faculty and staff commensurate with organizational goals, mission and vision supports both individual and team objectives. The importance of partnerships is well documented in research (Amrein-Beardsly, Barnett, Ganesh, & Tirupalavanum, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Partnerships with various stakeholders strengthen those leadership teams. Effective leaders assemble a team that represents those who are most respected and followed; the ones with their fingers on the pulse of the organization's informal communication system. Lencioni (2012) talks about team work as a strategic choice with a process deliberate and carefully considered. Here are six questions leaders and their teams must answer:

1. Why do we exist?
2. How do we behave?
3. What do we do?
4. How will we succeed?
5. What is most important, right now?
6. Who must do what? (Lencioni, 2012, p.77)

The answers to these questions ensure that the work of the team is purposeful and goal focused and they serve as a vehicle for honest and open discussions of all issues large and small. The importance of connecting when communicating with others results in successful communication (Maxwell, 2010). Effective communication must be actualized, not words being used but meaning nothing. Unless the receiver of those words not only understands the words said, but can truly understand what the words mean, communication is one-sided. For example, how a conversation makes a person feel should be a measure of effective communication. Morgan (2014) talks about effective leaders tell stories as a method of communication. The six questions (above) can help to create a basis of a story and the school community can identify with what has become the motivator or the drive for the work that is in front of the team. The six questions help to ensure consistency among grade level teams and the leadership team; it guides behavior and communication. The ability to use that to tell about the work underway is fabric that builds a stronger sense of community.

Changing Role of the Principal

The nation faces a probable shortage of school leaders when the current group of baby boomers continues to retire creating a staggering 40% turnover in the coming years (Spiro, Mattis & Mitgang, 2007). The Wallace Foundation (2007) concluded "the harsh truth is that the new school leader faces a dizzying array of tasks associated with managing a highly complex organization: from budgeting and busing to discipline, personnel and union matters and public relations" (p. 6). The report emphasizes, "Professional development of new principals is a worthwhile public investment" (p.6). Aspiring leaders are younger in age than their retiring baby boomer counterparts when first undertaking the challenging task of becoming a school principal. Joanne Rooney, co-director of the Midwest Principal's Center noted, "The challenges facing these young educators are unparalleled. Facing accountability for student achievement, implementing complex, special education policies, providing for diverse student populations, and dealing with parents who have misgivings about public education are only a few of these challenges. Yet many of these highly motivated young people have not acquired the skills that come primarily from experience" (Rooney, 2008, p.1). Jim Hull (2012), Center for Public Education's Senior Policy Analyst, asserted, "Principals (school leaders) are now more than ever focused on student achievement while still retaining their traditional administrative and building manager duties."

Because of this, principals typically work 10-hour days and many believe the job is just not “doable” as it is configured now” (Usdan, McCloud & Podmostko, 2000, p.1). Principals need to know how to work with a variety of populations, use the skills of public relations professionals, and understand the importance of building strong family relationships. Recognizing the relationship of family involvement to student achievement, research suggests that principals set the tone for the school, provide an atmosphere for collaboration between partners, and help both teachers and parents gain the skills to work together effectively for student success (Parent Involvement Center, 2012). The role of the school leader is a critical one. The job is demanding and complex, requiring long hours and diversified skills in order to meet the challenges and requirements of both a changing society and focus on academic accountability.

There is a compelling need to support new principals in the field. Researchers have examined existing programs to define best practices in the mentoring partnership. The Wallace Foundation suggests that mentors have high quality training. Their report contends that investing in developing new principals is a fiscal priority since the cost of turning around failing schools is greater both financially and academically (Spiro, Mattis & Mitgang, 2007). John Holloway (2004) emphasized the necessity of an effective leader mentoring program to combat the feelings of isolation and frustration. While many school districts have formal mentoring programs for beginning teachers, there is a lack of similar support for new principals. Often, principals will receive assistance once they are failing; the need for a more proactive approach is critical. The need to understand how to apply theory into practice, how to juggle an array of situations requiring attention, and how to cope with the needs and personalities of children and adults may be a daunting task for the beginner. The focus on rapid decision-making, often involving complex issues, has contributed to the stress facing young leaders. Creating a climate for change, engaging and enabling the whole organization, and implementing and sustaining change offers a framework for school leaders to include all stakeholders. Developing an understanding of what the change involves, who is impacted by the change, how the changes are facilitated and by whom are important considerations when a new concept is presented to the school community. Effectively communicating with staff members, parents and community groups is a critical component of leading organizational change. Establishing a culture of collaboration allows for parents and school faculty to work together successfully.

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