Balance Individual Autonomy and Collaboration to Center on Students

By Thomas J. Sergiovanni From *Principal Leadership*

COMPETENCE in a school is too often divided among different people. That teaching is regarded as an individual practice, in strong contrast to what is found in most other professions, is a perfect example.

The consequence of such division dilutes what each individual knows and ignores the collective intelligence that schools might otherwise have. Without this collective intelligence, it is doubtful

Thomas J. Sergiovanni (tsergiov@trinity.edu) is Professor of Education, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. His latest book, Strengthening the Heartbeat: Leading and Learning Together, *is available from Jossey-Bass.*

that closing the achievement gap and resolving other intractable problems will ever become more than wishful thinking.

The reason for concern is simple: It is organizational competence that makes schools smarter, and such competence is typically found to reside in the relationships, norms, memories, habits, and collective skills of a network of people. Simply put, organizational competence is the sum of everything that everybody knows and uses that leads to increased learning. This competence is measured not only by what we know but also by how much of it we know, how widely what we know is distributed, how broad its source is, how much of it is applied in a collective manner, and how much of it is generated by cooperation with others.

In an organizationally competent school, everyone has a role that defines his or her obligations and everyone is part of a reciprocal relationship that spells out mutual obligations. Reciprocal role relationships enable informal communities of practice to bubble up and institutionalized collaborative cultures to trickle down. When such informal communities of practice and institutionalized collaborative cultures are joined, schools achieve the desired balance between individual autonomy and collaborative work.

When Collaborative Cultures Work

Although many professions have evolved into communities where competence multiplies because it is aggregated, other professions have not. When collaborative cultures work, each person has a role that defines his or her obligations and is part of a reciprocal relationship that spells out mutual obligations. When informal communities of practice and institutionalized collaborative cultures are joined, we find the balance which we are in need of between individual autonomy and collaborative work.

One school that has struck the right balance between individual autonomy and collaborative work is Adlai Stevenson High School, which is located in Lincolnshire, Illinois. The leaders at Stevenson realize that authentic student centeredness carries the requirement that concern for students and their learning be embedded in a culture that values teachers, invests in their learning, and encourages their professionalism.

Consider, for example, how Stephanie Neuberger, a new teacher now working at Stevenson High School, described her interview experience. Neuberger's experiences with selection at Stevenson suggest that the social studies division at the school is both a community of practice and a collaborative culture:

"That morning, I observed in four different classrooms and began to

get a better idea of what Stevenson's culture includes. Although each of the teachers I observed had vastly different styles of teaching, they all shared a few commonalities, namely, an obvious passion for their subject and a sense of truly caring about their students."

After spending the day visiting classrooms and visiting with Eric Twadell, who serves in the capacity of social studies division director, about what she observed, Neuberger was invited back to the school for the purpose of having a panel interview. She noted that the panel she interviewed with put her at ease while she answered questions and indicated agreement at times. The final step in the interview process for Neuberger was having Twadell observe her teaching and talk to her about what he had seen.

Unbelievable Support and Guidance

Once Neuberger was hired, the support for the new teacher continued: "After accepting a position at Stevenson, I began to learn more about Stevenson's culture that summer. One of the subjects I would be teaching was AP psychology, so the psychology team had a few meetings to discuss curriculum and methods of teaching. The unbelievable amount of support and guidance I received over the course of the school year was foreshadowed by the events of the summer. During the summer months and thereafter, the other AP psychology teachers walked me through how to teach the course on a day-by-day basis."

Neuberger's story exemplifies how important the concept of being teacher-centered is to schools that value teaching and learning. The leaders at Stevenson High School realize that authentic student centeredness requires that concern for students and their learning be embedded in a culture that values teachers, invests in their learning, and encourages their professionalism.

Neuberger concluded, "I could not possibly count all the times I arrived at my desk to find a lesson plan or offers to help me. By observing other teachers, I was able to see what works for them and see how I can adapt what they do to use in my own classroom."

This informal community of practice is a powerful way in which to improve teaching and learning. As important as formal mentoring programs are, without the development of such voluntary and informal communities of practice, Stevenson runs the risk of promoting only contrived collegiality.

Contrived collegiality is characterized as being a set of formal, specific procedures which are intended to increase the attention being given to joint teacher planning and consultation. It can be seen in such initiatives as peer coaching, mentor teaching, joint planning,

formally scheduled meetings, and clear job descriptions and training programs for those in consultative roles. Contrived collegiality has merit in those situations in which administrators design those initiatives for the purpose of getting collegiality going in schools where little has existed before.

By the same token, the members of Stevenson's formal leadership team are obliged by their roles to take the lead in ensuring that Stevenson's purposes and values are represented and used as a basis for making decisions. Administrators often find themselves in the position of having to start with contrived collegiality, but in order for a true collaborative culture to emerge, this contrived collegiality must be supported by the communities of practice that teachers create.

Communities of practice emerge as a result of teachers' need to cooperate. Collaborative cultures are more deliberate, having been initiated and supported by leaders from above. Ideally, the two come together as one, creating a strong bond of people who are committed to working together toward goals and purposes that they share with each other.

Finding Foundational Pillars

Cultural connections and covenantal relationships are the foundational pillars of collaborative cultures. The cultural connections are more covenantal than contractual; they are bargains, but they are bargains of the heart and soul based primarily on loyalty, purpose, sentiment, and commitment that obligate people to one another and to the school.

But covenants are much more than bargains. In addition to being bargains, they are also promises that imply certain mutually held actions and commitments that are considered obligatory. Unlike legal documents and other formal agreements that spell out all the technical details, covenants are planted in the hearts of people and bind them together morally and obligate them morally to the conditions which are indicated in the covenant.

Cultural connections and covenantal relationships are the sources of authority for leadership at Stevenson High School. Without these connections, it would not be possible for the leaders at Stevenson to be successful stewards devoted to protecting Stevenson's value system and building the capacities of teachers who are responsible for embodying those ideas.

Dan Galloway, who serves in the capacity of Stevenson's principal, takes his roles as steward of the school's purposes and values and as capacity builder seriously. His goal is to build the organiza-

tional competence that Stevenson needs in order to achieve the school's goals and purposes:

"At the beginning of the school year—once our goals, projects, and initiatives have been identified—I meet with each instructional area director to collaboratively develop their departmental goals, projects, and initiatives. I ensure that each department has goals that are tied to helping achieve the district goals.

"At Stevenson High School, we are committed to building the leadership capacity of our staff, and we believe in dispersing leadership throughout the organization. Our administrative structure is less hierarchical and more flat, which means that many people share in the responsibility of providing leadership in our school. Our focus is on collaboration, not line of authority.

Knowing What Type of School

"We have defined our mission and we know the type of school we want to be. We have developed shared commitments that guide our behaviors to ensure that our daily work moves us toward realizing our vision. We consider ourselves to be a professional learning community. As principal, I am a steward of that vision and work to ensure that our daily activities are grounded in it."

Division directors play key roles at Stevenson, and much of the school's success can be attributed to them. John Carter, who serves as the director of the math division, echoes Galloway's sentiments about the importance of stewardship and sees himself as both a capacity builder and a protector:

"My goal is to help each teacher learn to make decisions about teaching, curriculum, content, and interpersonal relationships, using sound evidence and multiple perspectives. I structure our designated staff development time to provide teachers with the opportunity to continue to grow in content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.

"Through the various team interactions, I provide teachers with the experiences and feedback needed to grow into fully collaborative partners in the division. Our focus is to always approach topics from a data-gathering point of view so that we can make decisions and proceed using the data to support us.

"As a protector, I have to protect the department vision and assure progress toward it. I need to be able to base decisions and priorities on the direction we have set for ourselves—and occasionally remind people of it. Listening well to individuals as they express their opinions and feelings is an important part of balancing the progress and the collective emotional health of the division. While

it's true thatlearning can be difficult, it need not be overwhelming."

It seems reasonable to accept the idea that norms that build trust, identity, and efficacy are key to effective collaborative cultures. But how do these powerful norms come about? They come about from any of five basic directions: from formal team leaders, from informal team leaders, from courageous followers, from training, or from the larger organizational culture.

By definition, leadership and norms go together. Thus, the effectiveness of leadership is measured by its effect on cultural norms. And because leadership bubbles up from below and trickles down from above, there is no clear-cut monopoly on norm setting.

Under Leadership by Entitlement

In an environment of leadership by entitlement, if you care enough about the school and about its work and if you care enough for your colleagues, then you are obliged to be concerned about what the existing norms are and whether these existing norms are helpful in achieving our purposes.

Veteran Stevenson High School teacher Carol Levin sums up how collaborative cultures build the capacity of teachers and make schools more effective places for students to learn:

"On a small scale, collaboration is what happens every day among colleagues in department offices as we refine our daily lesson plans. We talk, as a matter of course, about student comprehension, student skills, teacher effectiveness, and how to improve on them all.

"On a larger continuum, the collaborative culture at Stevenson manifests itself in team meetings that actively involve every teacher in the building. Teaching teams consistently come together reinforced by their common subject matter and their unflagging efforts to push both the curriculum and student success forward.

"The team approach is successful because teachers feel we are given the *opportunity* to meet productively, not be robotically brought together for some forced reason. Teachers work comfortably together because we are empowered to generate goals from within our own ranks, goals that are important to our instruction, goals that we perceive as beneficial to the team and to our students.

"Because teams monitor their own progress, it's very easy to keep setting goals that raise the bar. The collaborative configuration encourages both individual and collective dialogue and reflection. Teachers share best practices, successful approaches, failures (which sometimes teach more than successes), and new ideas. We feel that our voices are regularly solicited, considered, and valued by our colleagues. No wonder we buy into collaboration." ✉