

TEACHER LEADERSHIP: Making Your Voice Count

How distributed leadership works and strategies for ensuring teacher-leaders have a powerful voice.

BY KATHRYN SINGH

From Kappa Delta Pi Record

Today, more than ever, teachers must work effectively and efficiently to meet seemingly contradictory demands placed on them by society. On the one hand, school personnel are tasked with attaining and publicly reporting high levels of student achievement in response to No Child Left Behind. On the other, school personnel must ensure that students learn 21st century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, and accessing and analyzing information. This dichotomy challenges educators to prepare students to select the right answers on standardized tests and, at the same time, to criti-

cally analyze the myriad possible solutions that may be appropriate for addressing problems in daily life. Teachers must prepare students to think both inside and outside the box.

This article presents a brief overview of distributed leadership and gives insights gained from creating and leading a distributed leadership team for three years at a high school. Working with a team offers benefits; yet, to ensure smooth operation, certain factors must be taken into consideration. I offer suggestions for both principals and teachers who are becoming more involved in distributed leadership. Ultimately, the goal for teacher-leaders is to enjoy and benefit from the experience as well as to make worthwhile contributions where it counts—in the teaching-learning arena. ►

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Distributed Leadership

Models of distributed leadership typically involve the interaction of leaders, followers, and situations that arise in the workplace. The interaction is collaborative, dynamic, mutually accountable, and based on a match between organizational need and individual expertise. Distributed leadership

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implies that members of an organization “open their professional doors,” moving from an isolationist to a shared mode of operating. This allows participants to share passion for their work, pursue a common vision, take advantage of expertise within the group, and optimize collaboration.

Depending on the immediate issue, individual members of the group naturally take on leadership roles. They work in diverse configurations, involving varying degrees of interdependence or sequences of interactions, according to the task. They assume different roles to move the group along in both tasks and relationships. When formal leaders create a distributed leadership model, they demonstrate that the organization values

the contributions of its members and affirm their belief that all individuals should have a voice.

One example of distributed leadership is a group of teachers in a professional learning community (PLC) who are problem solving about how they might address the issue of low student performance on test items related to place value in math. The principal, a math coach, and several teachers are analyzing student data, exploring benefits and disadvantages of the textbook and accompanying software, and discussing types of assessments used as benchmarks in each classroom. One teacher who uses music in her lessons reminds colleagues that learning a song helps students with content retention, and she offers to create a song on place value and teach it to her colleagues. Another teacher says that he will explore other instructional resources such as interactive Web pages and games. A third says that she is willing to organize walk-throughs so colleagues can observe one another’s classroom to learn new ideas and provide feedback.

The principal offers substitute time for two walk-through days, and mentions that there may be funds available for instructional materials. He points out an upcoming workshop on using games and music to teach math. Each member of the group has stepped up to offer suggestions and, in do-

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ing so, has assumed a leadership role—organizing walk-throughs, exploring instructional materials, creating teacher-made materials and sharing them, providing funding, and offering staff development. The group has identified an issue and worked together to address it. The solutions have come from the group, not from “above.”

Of course, working together in a structure designed specifically for interaction, such as a PLC, does not guarantee that all emerging instructional leaders will be “on the same page” in terms of what the issues are, how to address them, and their individual and group contributions. Unless there is ongoing and honest dialogue that helps them come to consensus, members may find themselves on very different paths, following very different visions. The fear of facing conflict and the potential of having to go “above and beyond” regular responsibilities must not deter staffs from shaping themselves into effective and efficient teaching and learning teams. All members of the shared leadership model must understand the benefits and know what is required to make it effective.

Distributing leadership makes sense for many reasons. Teachers can collaborate to address complex issues. Hulpia and others emphasized the positive impact that shared leadership has on teacher commitment, which in turn

affects school success. Teachers who believe in the organization’s goals and values are willing to exert the effort required to reach those goals, and feel loyalty toward the organization. Ultimately, sharing the responsibility for school improvement provides a support structure for teachers. Also, a greater sense of professionalism develops as teachers feel more empowered. Strong leadership throughout the school, in time, will make a difference in each classroom.

The Experience

During the period of 2003–2006, I was founding director of a private high school in Mexico. The school, part of a larger campus that included both a high school and a university, was structured in a hierarchical, top-down fashion. The director’s role was to create an all-new high school on the campus, hire and train staff, recruit students, set up a teaching and learning infrastructure, and define daily operations. I had the option of doing it alone or asking others for help. In the existing traditional structure, teachers did not expect to be involved in decision making, and “higher-ups” were accustomed to obedience, loyalty, and compliance. Moving to a distributed leadership model would be a paradigm shift, but I decided that it would be much less risky than operating as the “lone ranger” and facing

the possibility of not making the best decisions or having staff half-heartedly implement them.

The staff created a shared vision and plan, helped to hire and train a committed and energetic staff, recruited 500 students, which grew to 1,000 within three years, and established the high school as a place of purposeful activity and results. I began with a small team of teachers who had experience working within the same multi-campus system, and then gradually added new members as they became more familiar with the organization. The group included those who worked directly with teachers and students, as well as with parents. The leadership team invited other members of the staff to participate in activities and decisions as the need arose.

In addition to the primary team, a system of alternates permitted other teachers in various departments to be trained to take on leadership roles. Over time, as a result of their increased capacity and visibility in the organization, some of the first tier members accepted formal leadership positions. That allowed many of the alternates to become part of the main leadership team.

The distribution of leadership served a number of purposes: it allowed for the efficient design and effective operation of the new school; it fostered organizational commitment and trust;

and it developed capacity in staff members. Because there was intra- and interdepartmental alignment, teachers were able to make sure that students' experiences at the school made sense. A number of school-wide events, organized by the team contributed to student and parent motivation.

Problem solving on teacher and student issues took place in the leadership team meetings, allowing all participants to rally around those in need of support. When members experienced difficulties, the others provided emotional support. This was especially useful because starting a new school can be time consuming and stressful. I kept staff informed so that they were equipped with information needed to make wise decisions. I also provided training in decision making, teamwork, leadership, and in specific areas in which decisions were being made. Overall, the experience was unforgettable and worth sharing.

Lessons Learned as a Principal

Here are some lessons learned as a principal and suggestions for those considering promoting greater involvement in leadership:

1. Power is not finite, nor is it tied to a position; it is tied to expertise and commitment. Knowledge is not the possession of a few.
2. Success is more likely if the site team is made up of strong,

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opinionated, hard-working individuals. Capacity building is crucial. Knowledge and skills must continuously be refined to strengthen the links in the leadership chain.

3. Shared leadership requires trusting relationships. If teachers perceive unfair and dishonest treatment, trust will not develop, and teachers will choose not to collaborate. Trust develops through honest and ongoing dialogue. Teachers must dedicate energy to decisions that are relevant to them, and they must see results.

4. Leadership takes shape while addressing real issues, as the need for expertise arises. Leadership does not come about as a result of delegation or favoritism.

5. Examining decisions from different perspectives makes educators stretch and leads to sound, respected, and implemented decisions. Staff members should welcome positive conflict and debate as an opportunity to grow.

Suggestions for Teacher-Leaders

As teachers are invited to take on a more active role at their schools, it is important for them to consider the following suggestions:

- Don't let others make decisions that will impact you and your students. You should be involved in decisions that affect you and those you serve (e.g., discipline

plans, textbook selection, staff development, budgeting, strategic planning).

- Take the time to get to know your colleagues. Developing relationships builds powerful bridges that connect visions (e.g., reaching out to your neighbor even though he teaches a different grade level, getting to know a new teacher sitting alone in the staff lounge).

- Carefully analyze and reflect on any information given to you about the organization. Every piece of information contributes to the “big picture” and is worth knowing. Organizations are systems, and everything is connected in some way (e.g., budget information impacts instruction, as do policy decisions).

- Go about your business with the “leader lens” on, considering how decisions impact all aspects of the organization—but always keep your “teacher lens” handy (e.g., should money be spent on a part-time counselor or on extra pay for sponsoring after-school clubs?).

- Know your strengths and areas of opportunity. Seek experiences that allow you to continue developing facets of yourself so that you can contribute in multiple ways (e.g., developing the master schedule, being involved in interviewing teacher candidates, writing a grant).

- Always tie leadership to teaching and learning—that is

the priority of teacher-leaders. Ask: How does this relate to our work (e.g., how facilities impact teaching and learning, how spaces influence what we can do, and how people feel)?

Getting Started

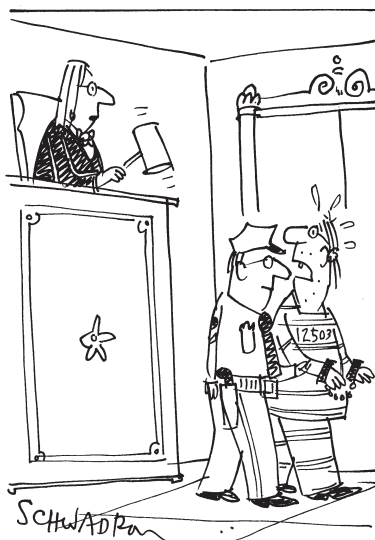
Distributed leadership provides teachers with the opportunity to have a voice in the organization, impact students' lives, and develop themselves personally and professionally. It changes the way educators are seen and treated within a school, community, district, and profession. As teachers prepare to enter into distributed leadership models, it is best for them to know themselves and others, develop capacity, share and trust, and make decisions focused on the well-being of students and their families. Teachers who take a front seat in designing, delivering, and evaluating the whole teaching and learning process have the potential to do great things.

Distributing leadership is a gradual process that involves gathering knowledge about the model, examining current practices in the school and district, assessing areas of expertise, building capacity, shifting paradigms, opening dialogue, resolving conflict, and putting in time and effort.

Working together, districts, school administrators, and teachers can move toward this model. The model can begin with a lead-

ership team (commonly known as ILT, or Instructional Leadership Team) and branch out gradually to other staff members, parents, and, at higher levels, students. With time, everyone will become accustomed to sharing information, making decisions, solving problems together, being mutually accountable, and growing individually and as a group.

The next step is to empower students by implementing a distributed leadership model within the classroom itself. It's a wonderful experience that leads to positive results for all. ■



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