

Cultivating Teacher Leadership: Where Do Principals Begin?

Research Brief

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Education journals, conferences, and new books everywhere emphasize how important teacher leaders are to effective teaching and learning in schools. With so much visibility, many principals might be tempted to simply designate teachers as “teacher leaders” and wait for the benefits of teacher leadership to take root in a school. However, rushing in without understanding what skills, dispositions and strengths are required of the school leader for teacher leaders to be successful is likely to lead to confusion and frustration - climate conditions that are the very opposite of those in successful schools. As with leading all change, the leader’s first job is to know him or herself - particularly those areas that might be blind spots - and to plan for addressing areas that are not strengths. This brief features a tool that leaders can use to help them avoid this pitfall with a clear self-assessment. Using this tool and developing a realistic plan to prepare as a leader sets up teacher leaders for success - and research is clear that schools that effectively distribute leadership are a win for students.

Developing Teacher Leaders: It Matters

The role of the principal is complex and demanding. Principals are typically “expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations/communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives.”ⁱ Juggling these responsibilities can often distract even the most dedicated and effective principals from their primary role as the instructional leader of the school. Indeed, the overall amount and variety of responsibilities are generally too great for one person to perform at consistently high levels.

Inspiring and engaging teachers as leaders is on the rise in response to this issue. In recognition that they alone cannot tackle school improvement efforts, principals have found ways to tap into the expertise in the building by distributing leadershipⁱⁱ in a way that gives teachers authentic opportunities to contribute, innovate, and grow as *teacher leaders*.ⁱⁱⁱ Research describes teacher leadership as the “process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.”^{iv} Leveraging the skills and talent that exist within the building not only promotes a culture of collective responsibility and shared accountability for school improvement, but also gives principals the space and support to be even more effective in their role.^v

“Distributed leadership is about creating leadership density, building and sustaining leadership capacity throughout the organization. People in many different roles can lead and affect the performance of their schools in different ways.”

Renowned scholars in the field of education leadership such as Joseph Murphy (Vanderbilt University) and James Spillane (North Western University) have documented the benefits of teacher leadership, and even developed road maps that principals can use to implement distributed leadership models in their schools.^{vi} While useful, road maps alone do not guarantee successful development of teacher leaders. There must also be a genuine willingness and inclination to recalibrate leadership to allow teachers to join in school decision-making. This means inviting teachers into the leadership ranks and giving them opportunities to perform tasks traditionally reserved for the principal or assistant principal. But entrusting others to lead can be a daunting task, especially when it results in increased dependence on those who are identified to assume new leadership roles--either formal or informal. For this reason, research suggests that principals need to take the time to assess their disposition toward authentic distributed leadership^{vii}—an important yet often overlooked reflective practice.

Assessing Readiness to Grow New Leaders

In order to assess their readiness to distribute leadership, principals should ask themselves: *Does my leadership allow for cultivation of “broad based leadership capacity”?*^{ix} The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) and Delaware Academy of School Leadership (DASL) in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Delaware have co-developed a tool that can help principals answer this important question. The self-assessment that follows is organized around three leadership behaviors that are necessary for teacher leadership to flourish: (1) Leading Change, (2) Communicating Effectively, and (3) Developing People.

Teacher Leadership Readiness Self-Assessment ^x		
<p>Directions: Read each statement then check ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to indicate whether you currently exhibit the leadership behavior. Use the space to the right of the statements to reflect on your strengths and opportunities for growth related to each behavior. [Remember: This is intended to be a reflective tool. It will be most beneficial if your reflection is based on fact rather than how you would like to see yourself or how you think others view your leadership.]</p>		
Leadership Behavior	Reflection on my leadership behaviors:	
	<p>If yes, what evidence do I have that demonstrates my ability to do well?</p> <p>If no, what resources can I identify that will increase my capacity to do this well? How can I practice my development in this area?</p>	
<p>I. Leading Change: A clearly defined school vision and an understanding of how leadership decisions align to that vision are essential to leading change. This is especially true when determining which teachers will help advance school improvement goals through their effectiveness as teacher leaders. Deciding who to tap requires principals to have a keen sense of the leadership gaps that exist in the school, as well as the ability to identify teachers who possess the right combination of skill and will to fill those gaps.^{xi} Assessing individuals’ skill and will can occur formally or informally, by conducting classroom walkthrough observations, observing PLC meetings, consulting other members of the administrative team, reviewing lesson plans, and analyzing student data.</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand the importance of collaborating with key stakeholders to shape a vision of academic success for my school. • I know how to engage others in school improvement efforts. • I know what leadership gaps to fill to achieve school improvement goals. • I have the ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of staff. • I can identify individuals who possess the right combination of skill and will to fill leadership gaps. • I am equipped to overcome challenges related to creating new leadership roles in my school. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<p>II. Communicating Effectively: Promoting two-way communication encourages teachers to not only share their perspectives but to challenge colleagues’ viewpoints—in a constructive and professional manner. Principals can create a safe and non-threatening environment where teachers feel comfortable exchanging ideas by modeling active listening and remaining open to others’ input on the best ways to achieve school improvement goals.^{xii}</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand the importance of two-way communication. • I build communication processes that make it safe for people to say what is on their minds. • I listen to others actively, checking to ensure my understanding. • I am willing to change my viewpoint based on the valid opinions of others. • I work to understand others’ perspectives. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<p>III. Developing People: One of the ways to demonstrate confidence in others’ capabilities is by creating opportunities for them to both learn and apply new skills. But the acquisition and application of new skills will not help teachers become more effective leaders if they do not receive specific, consistent, and actionable feedback on their performance.^{xiii} Effective performance feedback is essential to teacher leaders’ growth and development. Principals can also support and validate teacher leaders by managing their workload and celebrating progress. Celebration of “quick wins,” research tells us, is important to the progress of any improvement effort as it motivates team members to keep working toward goals.^{xiv}</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have built the climate for teachers to play a role in making key decisions. • I feel confident enough to let others assume leadership roles. • I help people take advantage of opportunities to learn new skills. • I know how to scaffold leadership opportunities for teachers. • I know how to manage teacher leader workload to avoid burnout. • I know how to provide effective performance feedback. • I celebrate progress related to the school vision. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

[Click here to access tools and resources that can help sharpen all three leadership behaviors.](#)



Bringing the Three Leadership Behaviors to Life

Doug Brown, principal of W.T. Chipman Middle School in Harrington, Delaware, focused on developing a team of teacher leaders from day one as a school leader. Mr. Brown emphasized three key skills he considered integral to teacher leader development, including the ability to galvanize staff around a change initiative, listen to his staff to determine their skills and assign teacher leader roles, and communicate expectations effectively.

Before embarking on his quest to develop teachers as leaders, Mr. Brown knew that he must be clear about the school vision and improvement goals. Mr. Brown recalled engaging his staff in a data analysis process that would inform the direction he set for the school. Because data revealed that W. T. Chipman was one of the lowest performing middle schools in the state, Mr. Brown found that it was “easy to convince the staff that we needed to try some new things.” This included visiting successful local schools to see what they were doing and discussing ways to adapt effective leadership and instructional practices to his school’s context. Out of this investigative process came a staff motto that undergirded the work of teacher leaders, “No Excuses, Just Results.”

Mr. Brown also pointed out that he needed to quickly identify the leaders in his new school. He decided the best way to do so was to listen to his staff and assess individuals’ skills and willingness to participate in the work of the leadership team. As a new principal, Mr. Brown observed team meetings and classroom instruction to get a better sense of teachers’ core values, skills, and knowledge. He paid particular attention to the interactions between teachers during professional learning communities (PLCs) and department meetings to see how they communicated with each other in professional settings. Through conversations and observations, he identified teachers who went beyond their normal duties to contribute to school improvement goals. He also consulted the Assistant Principal to discuss his perceptions of teachers who possessed the right combination of skill and will to lead school improvement efforts. These skills included a demonstrated ability to: lead a team, articulate a shared vision of success, coach others, and model effective instructional techniques.

Mr. Brown also took time to define and communicate teacher leader roles in his school. He made it clear that these roles were in addition to regular teaching assignments, and becoming a teacher leader meant taking on new responsibilities. Being on the leadership team or a department chair in this school meant sacrificing things like planning time and after school time, which was a necessary compromise to engage in the work of teacher leader. But he did his best to manage teacher leader workload to prevent burnout. Communication of teacher leader roles in his school also included setting expectations for giving and receiving feedback. Mr. Brown had the foresight to build in an assessment mechanism for his teacher leadership effort by implementing *Monitoring and Communications* (MaC) reports, which all school staff submitted to him on a monthly basis. MaC reports were a mechanism for staff to provide feedback on teacher leadership effectiveness. Using this tool, all staff members self-reported on the frequency and quality of their interactions with teacher leaders. The reports gave Mr. Brown information about the effectiveness of the individuals he placed in teacher leadership roles, which he used to coach and make adjustments as necessary.

In summarizing teacher leadership in his school, Mr. Brown affirms, “By giving teachers the opportunity to help shape a vision of academic success and challenging them to help me lead that vision, our teachers are more engaged—even though we’re asking them to give more and work harder. They have bought in to what it means to be a teacher leader and, together, we are accomplishing school improvement goals.”

Conclusion

The principalship is a rewarding yet challenging position. Research tells us that principals play an influential role in students' academic success.^{xv} But maintaining a strong instructional focus while balancing a wide range of demands is not easy. Distributed leadership models that prioritize the development of teachers as leaders have the potential to address this issue. Given the pivotal role teachers can play in the attainment of school improvement goals, principals may be tempted to act before taking the time to fully assess their readiness to distribute leadership strategically and authentically. Instead, principals should take a step back and reflect on their capacity to lead change, communicate effectively, and develop people. Once establishing readiness across these leadership behaviors, principals can then shift their attention to crafting an implementation plan. The next brief in this series will offer tips for developing systems and processes principals can use to grow new leaders.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Harris, A. & Muijs, D. (2003). Teacher leadership: Principles and practice. Coventry, UK: Institute of Education, University of Warwick.

^{iv} York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-316.

^v Sergiovanni, T. (1992). *Moral leadership: Getting to the heart of school improvement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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^{vii} Duignan, P. and Bezzina, M. (2006). *Distributed leadership: The theory and the practice*. Nicosia, Cyprus. CCEAM Annual Conference.

^{viii} Sockwell, A., & Westveld, B. (2012). Top ten leadership blind spots. The Executive White Paper Series. Retrieved from <http://www.s3vc.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Top10blindspots.pdf>

^{ix} Quinn, D. (2008, November). Distributed leadership for learning. West Virginia Institute for 21st Century Leadership. Charleston, WV: Principal's Institute. Retrieved from <http://docslide.us/documents/distributed-leadership-for-learning-david-quinn-university-of-florida-west-virginia-institute-for-21-st-century-leadership-november-2008.html>

^x Some items in the self-assessment were adapted from the Collaborative Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaires developed by Turning Point (available at http://www.collaborativeleadership.org/pages/pdfs/CL_self-assessments_lores.pdf) and *Teacher Leadership: Improving Schools Through Collaboration* presented by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/communications/convening/2015/TeacherLeadership.pdf>)

^{xi} Jackson, R. (2008). *The instructional leader's guide to strategic conversations with teachers*. Washington, DC: Mindsteps.

^{xii} What does the research tell us about Teacher Leadership? (2005). Washington, DC: The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Retrieved from http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/Center_RB_sept05.pdf

^{xiii} Gaines, R. (2014, June). *Providing effective instructional feedback*. Lawrenceville, GA: Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI).

^{xiv} Marzano, R., Waters, T. & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

^{xv} *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. (2012, January). Perspective. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf>; Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112 - 129.

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