

Preparing for the challenge of effectively distributing leadership: Lessons learned from the creation of a leadership team

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ABSTRACT: The experience of the author in creating and working with a leadership team over the course of three years in a private Mexican high school is shared. An overview of distributed leadership is provided as the theory underlying the approach taken at this new site. Information is shared on the actual institutional context of the team as well as the director's strategy for creating and preparing the team before and during their work. In addition, the author shares the way in which the group evolved over time. Pros and cons for working under a distributed model are discussed as are recommendations for leaders and trainers of leaders. Creating a successful distributed leadership model requires a great deal of thought and effort. It is crucial that members are willing and able to make and implement wise, informed decisions. It is important, as well, to be aware of a new "worldview" that must be developed at the site in order for the work of the group to be accepted and valued.

Introduction

Educators in today's schools find themselves immersed in an intense process of improvement, requiring greater collaboration and access to specialized knowledge typically possessed by those closest to students. School communities must meet the No Child Left Behind requirement of 100% proficiency in Language Arts and Math by 2014. There is less money, political and societal pressure on "failing schools," and the constant reminder that schools may be faced with major restructuring if test scores don't meet NCLB targets. At the same time, as they work towards eliminating the achievement gap, school personnel must provide a balanced education that develops the whole child – emotionally, socially, physically, and culturally. Schooling is complex in the 21st Century.

Traditionally, the school principal has been the main decision maker and ultimately responsible for results. However, if leadership lies exclusively with one

person, it is doubtful whether the skills and knowledge needed to move schools forward quickly and effectively will be present. Regarding this, Elmore (2000) shared the following concern: "In a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning, there is no way to perform the complex tasks involved without distributing the responsibility for leadership and creating a common culture that makes this distributed leadership coherent" (p. 5). Lashway (2003) echoed Elmore's concern when he commented, "...only classroom teachers have the day to day knowledge of specific students in specific classroom settings. Since essential knowledge is distributed across many individuals, it makes sense for leadership to be distributed as well" (p. 2). In order to eliminate the achievement gap, schools need to reconsider the way they do business.

In the past, success has been attributed to the work of one formal leader, a charismatic and transformational individual who generates the vision, capitalizes on

others' strengths, communicates powerfully, and convinces followers to focus efforts in favor of the institution. This person serves as the instructional leader, guiding the site to quality teaching and learning (Badaracco, 2001; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Robbins & Alvy, 2004; Rayma & Adrienne, 1996; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). Interestingly, despite the fact that this "hero" leader is not common, it is not always easy to put the model aside in favor of a more inclusive, shared approach that invites all to contribute actively to organizational goals (Meindl, 1995). If researchers and practitioners see formal leaders as the answer to school improvement, then it is probable that they may overlook real change agents in sites or districts. A report published on leadership in effective schools by the Washington School Research Center (2007) recommended, "If we do not succumb to the charismatic leadership assumption, then we might 'locate' leadership in a system of roles, or an overall organization focused on the key features that can encourage student success" (p.17).

Moving an organization towards a more distributed model of leadership requires much thought and planning. Before making any changes, it is important to explore theory and learn from others' experiences, in order to assure smooth and favorable implementation. In this article, I will share a brief overview of distributed leadership theory. Following that, a description of an experience in distributed leadership, involving myself as founding director, and staff of a private high school in Mexico, will be presented and discussed as it relates to the literature. Recommendations for leaders and trainers of leaders will follow.

Theoretical framework

As schools face the challenge of successfully meeting the needs of diverse students and families, there is a demand to channel knowledge naturally found in members of the organization in pursuit of best practices. Elmore (2000) claimed that the demand to drastically improve services requires a new way of coordinating and collaborating services in the schools. Current accountability systems examine results at many levels, including the classroom, requiring teachers to be actively involved. Formal leaders play the role of "buffers," not directly involved with the "technical core"

of teaching and learning, which implies that they must tap into the expertise of those who work directly with children. The challenge proposed by Elmore requires a new look at the relationship that has typically existed between leader and followers in order to determine how distributed knowledge can be identified and channeled effectively.

The dichotomy of "leader-follower" is typically used to describe working relationships, but this either-or polarization may no longer be valid. Gronn (2003) concluded that reality involved a situational shifting of roles. It cannot be taken for granted that leadership always lies in the administrator as he or she may not be the most knowledgeable or skilled in that moment. Bennett, Wise, Woods, and Harvey (2003) called distributed leadership "a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action" (p. 3), implying that leadership is more fluid and shared rather than set in one individual. Some researchers suggest a shift from "hero" to "capacity building" leaders, stressing that today's complexity has required organizational structures to shift, taking on a more horizontal than vertical nature. Roles become more dynamic and collegial although this does not mean that formal leadership disappears; it is just redefined (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2008).

Although distributed leadership has existed for a long time (Gronn, 2006; Harris, 2008; Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Young, 2007), it did not become a topic of discussion until the end of the 20th century (Bolden, 2011; Pearce & Conger, 2003). In a study of trends in leadership publications, Bolden (2011) identified a spike around distributed, shared or collective leadership since 2000. He also discovered that almost 70% of articles on the subject were published in the field of education and educational management. A variety of terms are used in the field to describe the phenomenon, but there is no clear indication as to whether the use of those terms indicates a different mentality about leadership or whether it is a semantic or political issue.

Despite a variety of approaches to distributed leadership, researchers have identified some basic premises underlying frameworks that have been developed. Leadership is an emergent property of a network of individuals. Leadership boundaries are opened, with varieties of expertise distributed

amongst many. The purpose of distributing leadership is to improve practice and performance, which requires continuous learning and mutual respect for expertise. Leaders model what they hope to see in others and offer support needed to get the job done (Bennett et al., 2003; Elmore, 2000).

At this time, work in the field is focused on defining exactly what distributed leadership looks like: how it occurs, its benefits and challenges, and how it is related to the micro-politics of an institution. Definitions of distributed leadership vary, but they basically focus on the way organizational members assume responsibility for certain functions, the degrees of interdependence and the sequencing of leadership events. Spillane and Sherer (2004) and Spillane and Diamond (2007) defined distributed leadership as an interactive network of leaders, followers and situation. They identified three ways in which groups could distribute practice: collaborative (building on contributions), collective (individual yet interdependent), and coordinated (a particular sequence). These authors believe that leadership should be examined as a practice rather than as a specific structure, function or role. Another model for distributing tasks amongst leaders includes paralleling (sharing perspective), positioning (developing understanding), storing (problem resolution), and seeking (re-encountering information) (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004). Distributed leadership changes the organization of work and requires the development of new roles and relationships.

Distribution happens over time as needs become more complex in the organization. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (2004) discussed a three phase model of distributed leadership. In the first phase, the leader strategically distributes tasks, introducing shared leadership. In the second phase, the leader creates a mutual learning culture and develops potential. In the final phase, the leader motivates and supports others as they take leadership risks according to their capacity. The six types of leadership that occur over time are formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural, with cultural being the goal. Gronn (2002) explained that organizational members may spontaneously collaborate, develop supportive relationships over time, or participate in institutionalized groups. In a study on leaderless

teams, Barry (1991) discovered that different roles were needed for success, including visioning, organizing, bridging and maintaining social contacts, and that these roles were most likely distributed. Day, Hopkins, Harris and Ahtaridou (2009) discovered that distributed leadership may arise due to external pressures to increase achievement and implement new policies and programs, typically originating as a response to formal leadership's intervention.

Leadership distribution is complex. When investigating sites with distributed structures, Martinez, Firestone, Mangin and Polovsky (2005) discovered that multiple, competing visions were present in some organizations. This finding goes against the assumption that a common understanding of goals and strategies exists naturally when leadership is distributed. Leaders must be prepared to develop and promote shared visions and paths and to constantly revisit and modify them as needed. They must also build trust, develop confidence and knowledge, foster positive attitudes towards collaboration, and provide feedback (NCSL, 2004). Woods and Gronn (2009) expressed a concern that distributed leadership may actually eschew democratic principles in favor of efficiency and effectiveness. Distributing leadership effectively involves sharing power as well as trust and reciprocal support (Gordon, 2010; Harris, 2008; Hatcher, 2005; Young, 2007). At times, cultural and structural conditions are not "in tune" with a distributed approach, there are conflicting priorities, formal leaders are incapable of tapping into others' potential, the right people aren't linked with the right task, or there is a lack of coordination. All of these factors may impede effective leadership sharing (Harris, 2008 & 2009; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood, Mascal, Strauss, Sacks, Memon & Yashkina, 2006; Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005).

A number of investigators have examined the link between distributed leadership and results in the schools. Some have discovered that distributed leadership may contribute to higher levels of performance and organizational change (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Copland, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). Others have failed to show significant impact and propose that further research be done. They suggest topics such as the

impact of distribution on entities beyond the school, the connection between distributed leadership and performance, the role played by power and influence, and perceptions of group members regarding the model's impact on them (Bolden, 2011; Gordon, 2010; Mayrowetz, 2008; Robinson, 2009; Timperley, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Youngs, 2009).

As schools move towards greater distribution of leadership, levels of awareness must be raised, new mindsets and tools must be developed, and additional research must be carried out. Aspiring school leaders must be knowledgeable about this new way of work and prepared to take on a new role. Sharing experiences from the field with those who train leaders can help them nurture dispositions, knowledge and skills useful when working with this type of leadership approach. In order to make sure leaders are willing and able to distribute leadership and power and act as the aligning element, leadership development programs must be re-examined and modified.

As schools begin redefining roles and responsibilities, authority, and power to create a flatter structure, school leader preparation programs that train individuals to be directive heads of a hierarchical organization will become limited in their effectiveness and utility. We know we need to move toward distributive leadership development in our school leader preparation programs, but we have insufficient theory and models of how to prepare individuals for it. (Dean, 2007, p.12)

What follows is the account of a distributed leadership experience that took place over the course of three years and the valuable lessons I learned as a result of that journey.

Research design

In this study, I employed the analytic autoethnography approach. According to Anderson (2006), the autoethnographer is "1) a full member in the research group or setting, 2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and 3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader

social phenomena" (p. 375). Anderson also explained that this type of research involves analytic reflexivity and dialogue with informants beyond the self. The researcher places a phenomenon within a greater social context in order to shed light on said phenomenon, based on his or her experiences. He or she plays a dual role of participating in what is happening and, at the same time, documenting the process. There are advantages and disadvantages to this type of research. The researcher is immersed in the setting and, as a result, has firsthand knowledge, feelings and thoughts on the phenomenon. He or she also has access to information. A disadvantage may be that the researcher primarily focuses on his or her perspective. Another factor to take into consideration is the mutual influence the researcher and setting have on each other. Autoethnography should seek to explain rather than just describe.

Role of the researcher

I served as the director, or principal, of the high school under study. I am a foreign born (U.S.), bilingual caucasian woman in my 40s who had been living and working in Mexico for five years at the time the high school was opened. I had been working in the private educational system described for four years and had been approached about opening a high school in a state where the system did not previously have a campus. As I began to work with staff, I formed a leadership team, which I documented as it evolved over the course of three years. Upon assuming my role as director, I held a Bachelors degree in Spanish, a Masters in Second Language Acquisition, a Masters in Educational Administration, along with a Doctorate in Educational Administration. I had worked previously in a number of roles, both teaching and administrative, mainly in bilingual settings. As a leader, I believed strongly in shared or distributed leadership and, because of this, moved the group in this direction. I also realized that I needed to align my work as a director with both the culture of the institution and the culture of the country where I was working. In this system, there were a limited number of women in administrative roles with even fewer foreigners holding leadership positions at the school level so I felt very honored to be given this responsibility.

Findings

Context of the distributed leadership team experience

The experience described here took place from 2003 to 2006 at a high school that was part of a multi-campus, private system in Mexico serving primarily higher socioeconomic level students from middle school to university although approximately 40% of students receive scholarships. I was founding director of the high school, which started with approximately 500 students and grew to almost 1,000 in three years. The high school's founding staff included approximately 50 teachers, with one-third from other campuses in the national system and two-thirds hired locally. Approximately half of the staff was full-time and the other half part-time. There was great interest on the part of both students and teachers to be part of this institution as it was the first campus of a prestigious system to open in that particular state. I, as director, was involved with every facet of the process: monitoring construction, recruiting students, hiring and training staff, scheduling, selecting texts, and setting up basic operations. All of this was done with the support and approval of the campus director who oversaw both high school and university programs. The campus level leadership group was made up of the campus director, the two university directors (business and engineering), the high school director, and directors of support areas (business, marketing, student services). All directors reported directly to the campus director. This campus level group met weekly to discuss areas such as marketing, budget, personnel issues and high school-university alignment.

The main office, in northern Mexico, was responsible for monitoring the vision and mission and determining system wide strategies. Training for teachers was the same throughout the country, with staff taking on-line and face-to-face courses, participating in campus and institution-wide activities, and documenting proficiency through a professional development portfolio. All teaching staff was trained in the way of the institution and all students were expected to know and live the mission. The institutional structure involved mandates traveling top down to the campuses. Most decisions were made at higher levels and accepted. Subordinates expected superiors to be in charge and

to order and delegate. A common phrase used with both students and staff was "ponte la camiseta" (put on the t-shirt), which meant that all should be loyal to the mission. When new students passed entrance requirements, they were actually given a t-shirt to put on to show their allegiance. Full-time teachers were expected to be on campus for an eight-hour day and to help with other activities, as requested. There was no employee union. Part-time teachers were expected to teach classes and, in addition, to provide tutoring. Many part-time teachers volunteered to help with non-classroom related activities because they wanted to support the institution and because they hoped to get a full-time job.

As a result of the campus' organizational structure, tasks were distributed differently than they might be in American schools. Tasks related to business, marketing or student services were handled by departments outside of the high school or university. For example, when the schedule was designed by the high school it was uploaded by Student Services. Rooms were assigned and use restrictions were imposed by the business office for security purposes. Another example was when teachers were hired. Candidates were interviewed by the high school or university and, in addition, were required to take psychometric tests, turn in paperwork and be interviewed again by Human Resources. Student disciplinary cases of a more severe nature went through Student Services, and they decided on consequences rather than the director or teachers at the high school or university. Physical plant requests went through the business area; the high school and university directors could not tell the custodian, directly, to do something. Some functions were outsourced such as cafeteria services, transportation, security and cleaning, and these employees were overseen by the business area in conjunction with the provider.

This division of tasks allowed the high school and university staffs and directors to focus their attention on academic issues; however, this structure also complicated matters because many factors which influence the academic aspect of the schools could not be addressed by those directly impacted. Those making decisions tended to focus on issues from their own department's point of view rather than considering the school's context. The organizational model was

top down, standardized, greatly centralized, somewhat fragmented and often cumbersome. Despite this structure, or perhaps because of it, I decided to implement a distributed leadership model that would join and coordinate forces.

Creating the distributed leadership team

There were many questions to be answered before creating the high school leadership team. First, it was important to determine why a leadership team was necessary. It was also crucial to determine how the group would work in terms of roles and relationships within the group and as they interacted with others. Scope of responsibility, obligation and authority all needed to be established. There had to be obvious benefits of making decisions this way in order to justify exerting the effort to make the model work.

I needed to consider the implications of distributing leadership in the early stages of the new school when it was important to set the tone for future work. I considered that campus level administration might not accept a leadership team making decisions, and this challenge needed to be addressed as well. The way parents would react to this operating model was also important as they could perceive the move as democratic and innovative or as my shirking responsibility. I needed to guarantee that the team would be perceived as legitimate in order to avoid having "rubber stamp" status.

In addition, I had to consider whether the teachers were ready to assume an active leadership role, considering the fact that they had just come together as a staff. Thought needed to be given as to who would participate, how long they would serve and how they would be selected. Considering whether there would be union issues or problems with other advisory groups was not an issue as neither existed in this particular situation. Participating on a leadership team would take teachers' time, and I needed to determine how those involved would take care of other responsibilities. I didn't want teaching and learning to suffer as a result of team activities. Another issue was determining which areas team members would be exposed to for information only, advising or decision-making purposes. Finally, frequency and types of meetings needed to be set, considering both face-to-face and on-line options. All

of these things would unfold throughout the process as I decided to proceed.

I invited seven people to participate in the leadership team. The team was comprised of one American woman (myself), three Mexican women (department chairs and academic director), one British woman (department chair), two Mexican men (bilingual director and department chair), and one American man (bicultural director). All of the foreign members had lived in Mexico for a number of years. Approximately 50% of the group had worked in the institution before, in other campuses, and 50% had been hired locally. I initiated the team, myself, due to the fact that it was a new site and the teachers had not yet formalized their way of working.

Structuring the work

All team members were released from one class, providing them with release time to work on tasks that arose naturally from the creation of a new high school such as programming classes; hiring, training and supervising teachers; managing discipline cases; planning and evaluation; event organization; marketing; definition of processes; communication with teachers, students and parents; and documentation of experiences and processes. The group met once a week for two hours. In between meetings, they communicated via email, appointments, phone and chat. Members of the team frequently worked in my office consulting, sharing, visiting and chatting.

It was important, during the process of shaping and operating the team, to constantly evaluate process and results. The group needed to be informed before making decisions and to follow up in order to determine whether decisions went well. They needed to maintain confidentiality and be respectful of each other and their colleagues. Responsibilities outside of the team's work could not be neglected. The group needed to know what to do when they didn't understand something or when they made a mistake. These new leaders also needed to know when it was appropriate for them to make decisions with or without consulting me. It was crucial that the group learn and grow together. Members needed to give the team priority over their own interests. Finally, the team had to be effective and efficient. I worked closely with team members, training

and coaching them for their new roles.

Pros and cons to working in a team

There were many positive aspects to working in a distributed leadership team. There were more perspectives represented; different personal and professional strengths were brought to the table. I, as formal leader, was not alone, especially at such a crucial time – the shaping of the new high school. Collaboration was modeled for staff members and students, and new leaders were formed. There was more presence and influence within the campus as the group presented a cohesive front when issues arose. Decisions were more informed and many times errors were avoided due to the fact that everyone in the team kept a close eye on operations.

Negative aspects were also experienced during the three-year time period. Working in a team required more time and effort. Leadership did not come naturally to all. Each person had his or her own personality, and these sometimes clashed. Territoriality arose between departments or programs. There was a need to share more information, which required filtering, organizing and planning ahead. The sequence of communication had to be respected; it was important to speak with the group before informing the faculty as a whole. Sometimes confidentiality was not maintained.

Overall, the results were positive. The team arrived at a shared vision, activities and norms for operation. They worked together to hire and support two large waves of teachers. The group resolved student and parent issues related to things such as grading, attendance, behavior or conflicts with teachers. Team members organized and institutionalized a number of well-attended school-wide events. Leadership team participants developed a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the institution. They supported each other, helping out when personal issues arose or when members of the team had problems to resolve in their department or program. Everyone on the team knew what was happening throughout the school and, as a result, could make solid decisions. The group celebrated each others' successes. When there was an activity they worked together (for example, evaluations of teachers done via computer by students reached an almost 100% response rate). Overall, the members presented a

strong, cohesive line in meetings and training sessions, sharing planning and facilitation. The group often worked nights and weekends and could easily involve others in activities. What occurred was almost "Pied-Piper like."

After three years, the first graduating class performed at high levels on standardized tests and the population doubled. In the Enlace test, in 2006, percentages of students scoring at proficient or advanced in Reading Comprehension were as follows: national 52.3, state 57.8, state private 65, the high school under study 88.5. In terms of Math, in the same year, the percentages were as follows: national 15.6, state 16.3, state private 19, and this high school 76. Another nation-wide exam, CENEVAL, resulted in 92% of students receiving proficient or advanced results (score of 1000-1149 and 1150-1300). Compared to the national average (957), the state average (955), and the state private school average (978), the high school was doing well with an average of 1056 out of a possible 1300. There was positive growth over the three-year period under study. From the founding year 2003 to 2006, the student population grew from 480 to almost 1000 students. The number of teachers at the site grew from 50 to more than 70, with 70% being part-time instructors and 30% full time instructors.

Discussion of findings

Looking beyond the charismatic leader, as the Washington School Research Center (2007) suggested, leadership was found within the group and nurtured. If I, as formal leader, had followed a more traditional model, which I believe was expected in the setting, the knowledge that team members had of the institution itself, their expertise in subject areas, their understanding of the way the Mexican educational system works and what the local community expected would most likely not have surfaced. The commitment to making the new school work might also not have been as intense. It would have been a challenge, time and energy wise, for me to do all that was done in such a short time if I had worked alone. The camaraderie of the group made the labor intensive and sometimes stressful process easier to get through; it actually became fun and rewarding rather than discouraging and overwhelming.

Applying the model of Spillane et al. (2001, 2004 & 2007), leadership was, in fact, stretched across the group and tied to people, situations and tools. The group, upon creating a new school, had to interact with many different types of situations and tools in order to create the infrastructure for operations. The group had to create schedules, hiring processes, discipline procedures, departmental norms, and school-wide events, to name a few of the people-situation-task interactions that occurred throughout the three years.

The group carried out all three types of coordination described by Spillane and colleagues. There was collaborative coordination, for example, when the group put together a school-wide event or procedure. There was collective coordination when each worked within his or her department on strategies to get students to complete on-line teacher evaluations. Coordinated coordination occurred when all contributed to the master schedule or screened teacher applicants and then interviewed and trained, or when they helped with the admissions test preparation and administration and then results sessions.

Leadership was distributed, as the NCSL (2004) report described, in phases, especially due to the fact that the staff was new and there was a lot of structuring to do. Gradually, more and more responsibility was released while members of the team were coached in order to understand and fulfill their roles. I began by formally creating and shaping the group and eventually the model became part of the culture. There were also staff members serving as “apprentices” ready to support the leadership team members and take their place if needed, and it did occur. Strategic changes were made because members were recruited to take on other leadership roles or because a couple of members were not able to keep their learning curve moving.

Some “buffering” was done by me when it came to non-teaching related issues, as Elmore described, but in reality more information was shared than withheld. The purpose of the leadership distribution was to improve practice and performance, there was continuous learning, respect for others’ expertise, and I, as formal leader, served as a support. There were on-going discussions about the work itself and how we were to carry out the work.

As Elmore (2000) and Harris (2008) suggested, my

formal leadership role became more of a hub, serving as a coordination point for all decisions and activities. The relationships that developed were central to the process, as was the blurring of leadership boundaries. This flexibility of roles needed to occur within the high school and beyond with campus staff and community members. (Bennett et al., 2003). The group actually came up with a matrix that addressed the issue of how to handle different types of decisions, and the formal leader worked with them on being independent, while, at the same time, maintaining interdependence and accountability. Talking openly about what each area did and sharing decisions and the thinking behind them strengthened the group as well as individuals.

Participants in the leadership team carried out the functions described by Barry (1991) as they envisioned what the high school would look like within the larger umbrella of the institution; organized new procedures and structures; bridged between departments, team and staff, high school and campus, and high school and community making sure that everyone was understood and that all human and financial resources were utilized effectively; and maintained social contacts within and beyond the group.

The group was born as a response to creating and implementing new policies and procedures and based on the initiative of the formal leader (Day et al., 2009). In order to make sure that everyone had the same vision in mind and was moving in the same direction, there were frequent conversations within the group, with staff, and with the larger campus and community (Martinez et al., 2005). In a new setting, it may be difficult for leadership to emerge naturally, when so many things need to be done quickly and when there is a larger institutional umbrella that needs to be navigated.

The issue of power and influence came up in terms of conflicts with the campus level administration. Issues did arise when the high school questioned campus policies that they did not see as being in the best interest of students and staff (Gordon, 2010; Harris, 2008; Hatcher, 2005; Young, 2007). These conflicts were due to conflicting priorities and structural and cultural issues that did not favor a distributed model. I was initially seen by the campus as the only official decision maker because that’s what the structure dictated. Gradually, campus level personnel trusted leadership

team members and began to know when it was really necessary to consult me before agreeing to requests.

At times, the priorities of the high school, such as promoting democratic processes, building community, promoting academic freedom, and providing access to instructional facilities, were not seen as important by the campus director or other campus level administrators. One example is when I was told by the campus director that the large Open House activity which had a tremendous impact on students, staff and parents, as well as the media, was “fluff.” Another example of mismatched priorities was when I tried to initiate a School Site Council and, consequently, was warned by the campus director that this would give parents too much power (Harris, 2008 & 2009; Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005). A third example is when the business director would not approve overhead projectors because he felt that they were not needed; the team spoke up and was permitted to order one per floor. A final example is when the high school fought to give teachers keys to classrooms. The rule was to lock rooms immediately after class and then security personnel had to open them (in order to keep equipment safe and rooms clean), which did not always work out well. The leadership team convinced the campus to provide keys. As a group, there was more of a solid front when it was time to fight for something the high school needed.

Recommendations for leaders and trainers of leaders

School leaders must develop attitudes, knowledge, values and skills that allow them to face the challenges in today’s schools. A distributed leadership model permits them to utilize the talents, interests, and knowledge of staff in order to tackle complex work. In order to prepare school leaders for the challenges of distributed leadership, the following recommendations are offered.

Leaders must accept that the work in schools is changing, that schools are complex organizations, and that they cannot bring about change alone, no matter how skilled or knowledgeable they are. They must see the value in involving others and realize that true leadership lies in lighting the fire that ignites the passion and commitment of self and others. Administrators should not assume a “hero” leadership

role. They must get to know themselves and others in order to determine strengths and areas of opportunity; this takes time, energy, a desire to connect, and a willingness to accept expertise outside of oneself. When involving others in important decisions and activities, it is crucial to be honest and forthcoming in terms of expectations and to have clear, effective structures in place to facilitate this new type of work. Leaders must be skilled in approaching others and engaging them in meaningful conversations, observing and providing feedback, assessing needs and determining next steps, and coaching respectfully in order to build capacity. This synergy building requires that leaders value reflection, constructive feedback, capacity building and sharing of power. It also means that they are capable of matching staff capacities to organizational needs and coordinating efforts.

Today’s leaders require a new, fine tuned set of knowledge and skills. Leaders must understand the micro-politics of schools. This means that power, influence, authority, and status must be addressed. In addition, leaders must understand theory and practice in areas such as adult learning, distributed cognition, action theory, communities of practice, organizational learning, democratic decision-making, and effective communication. Leaders should train themselves to observe team dynamics, facilitation, conflict resolution, decision-making and problem-solving so that they may facilitate group processes. They should be able to determine when, where and how issues should be addressed, whether it is with a team, with one or two other individuals, or by themselves. This adaptability requires knowledge of organizational behavior, emotional intelligence, ethics and problem framing. In order for a team to be effective, organizational procedures and policies must be clearly defined. Doing short and long term planning, monitoring effectiveness and making adjustments are also important skills. Leaders must be able to recognize positive and negative cultures and move people towards environments more conducive to positive change. In addition, they must understand how their site fits into the big picture. Leaders must recognize first and second order change processes and know how to lead them.

Concluding thoughts

Educational leaders are charged with making positive change and mobilizing others in a powerful way. Speaking about distributing leadership is a start. Developing values, attitudes, skills and knowledge that leaders need is the next step. These new demands require changes in mindsets and in practices. They require on-going reading and discussion with colleagues as well as a new, more “enlightened” type of contact with the field. Leaders should not and cannot venture into the schools during these complex times without the tools needed to form a strong team that strives to provide the best teaching and learning environment for children and the most positive, satisfying and enriching setting for adults.

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