

SHARED LEADERSHIP: A ROAD MAP TO STUDENT SUCCESS FOR SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS

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ABSTRACT:

Even during a global pandemic, shared leadership is a crucial component in the success of schools and districts. With all of the changes leaders are faced with, they must be more reliant on teams to learn together, while implementing new strategies that best support the needs of teachers and students. This article highlights research on shared leadership practices and provides leaders recommendations for putting them into action regardless of the type of learning model.

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Leaders at all levels are continuously searching for programs and initiatives to increase the success of their students, teachers, schools and/or districts. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are leadership practices that can be implemented that have a significant impact on students' and adults' outcomes. Research and experience tell us leaders cannot do this work alone and the idea of the lone super leader is largely a myth (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Leithwood, & Seashore-Louis, 2012). School and district leaders need to use the collective knowledge, expertise and experience of key members of their schools and districts to make more informed decisions and drive initiatives. This is especially critical as school and district leaders implement new models of education as a result of the global pandemic, including remote, hybrid and traditional face-to-face learning. This article draws from the educational research on shared leadership to outline several key practices that school and district leaders should consider implementing as they navigate the ever-changing educational landscape.

Practice 1: Create Conditions that Build Trust and Psychological Safety

Trust and psychological safety serve as foundational elements in school and district success and the currency of a leader's influence. Shared leadership requires leaders to build trust and create the conditions where it becomes safe to take risks without fear of being punished for making mistakes. In an environment where everyone is a learner, particularly during the pandemic, it is important for leaders to be more self-aware of the need for high levels of trust and spaces to implement new strategies. To increase team effectiveness, leaders need to engage in trust-building behaviors including establishing clear and consistent expectations, extending care to others and demonstrating authenticity regardless of a specific educational model (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Why is building trust and creating psychological safety important for leaders?

When there are high levels of trust between the leader and teacher, there is an increased willingness for collaboration and learning from one another. Higher levels of trust and psychological safety within teams allow for a team's willingness to take risks, share personal experiences and be more creative (Edmondson, 2019; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Teachers begin holding both their colleagues and themselves accountable in a way that gets work done and challenges all to work harder toward shared goals. Without trust, teachers are unlikely to take the risks required to go beyond what is safe or make themselves vulnerable enough to aspire to ambitious goals.

What does this look like in practice?

Leaders build trust through actions including listening, developing clarity through common language, holding one-on-one conversations and forming collaborative inquiry teams (Eppinga, et. al., 2018). Leaders also develop trust when they regularly participate as learners with their teachers as they work toward common goals. Leaders and their teams should provide virtual and face-to-face check-ins that ask teachers the types of support they need to best meet the needs of all students.

Practice 2: Lead with Empathy

Shared leadership requires each team member to work with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Leaders must move beyond simply knowing how others feel; they must also understand the perspectives of their staff. Extra effort and care is needed by leaders in spaces that are not face-to-face to ensure that all perspectives are truly heard. Being empathic to develop an understanding where others are coming from is critical in the development of shared leadership in all learning environments (Brown, 2018).

Why is the use of empathy important for leaders?

The awareness and acknowledgement of others' emotions is an important and powerful competency for a leader (Kellet et al., 2002). Putting ourselves in others' shoes as you are listening to support them is critical in developing shared leadership and coaching your team to improve performance. When leaders place listening as a priority, they increase the likelihood of not missing opportunities for team learning and growth. By not prejudging or interrupting contributions from colleagues and teams, they develop the conditions for shared leadership.

What does leading with empathy look like in practice?

Leading with empathy includes being socially-aware, recognizing and validating others' emotions, and responding to individual needs. Practicing active listening and asking clarifying questions increases understanding and strengthens the leader's ability to provide supports that produce better outcomes.

Practice 3: Promote Diverse Perspectives

Leaders play a critical role in the communication that takes place within and among their teams, allowing for the effective exchange of ideas and messages in a non-judgmental environment. All team members need to feel a part of the team and know their voices are heard and honored.

Why is promoting diverse perspectives important?

Diverse perspectives serve to leverage the skills, experience and expertise of team members that will likely result in more effective decisions or outcomes. Leaders need to hear and embrace various cultural, experiential and generational perspectives found in their teams. The need to make decisions inclusive of all voices will support in meeting the wide spectrum of student needs across different learning models. Given the unique circumstances in which there is a lack of experiences leading in time of significant uncertainty and where there is not a clearly defined or known effective solution, diverse perspectives can serve to address these adaptive challenges.

What does promoting diverse perspectives look like in practice?

To promote diverse perspectives, leaders need the ability to embrace their own vulnerability, create feedback loops and allow for individuals to effectively exchange ideas where all voices are heard and honored in a safe, transparent environment. As the expressed needs of students, families and staff continuously change, intentionally created opportunities for collaborative dialogue promote solutions that are inclusive of all team member voices. In addition, asking for feedback to ensure clarity and understanding that can be effective in promoting diverse perspectives.

Practice 4: Foster Professional Growth and Teacher Leadership

Rather than operating in isolation, leaders need to leverage the influence of teachers to extend beyond classrooms and to others within their own school, district and community:

“Teacher leadership refers to that set of skills demonstrated by teachers who continue to teach students but also have an influence that extends beyond their own classrooms to others within their own school and elsewhere” (Danielson, 2006).

These opportunities for professional growth and shared leadership include participating in teams at the teacher, school and district levels.

Why is fostering professional growth and teacher leadership important?

Collaborative team settings create the space, process and structures where teacher voices can be elevated and influence school and district decision-making. Leaders at all levels of the system must continue learning and growing in the face of changing/unplanned disruption. Providing these professional growth opportunities serves to build the capacity of others to lead regardless if they are a teacher or an administrator. Teachers are in the best position to track and evaluate student learning in the environment. As a result, focusing on developing teacher leaders is paramount in responding to school and district challenges effectively. Leaders become motivated to be competent in their practice, they engage colleagues to encourage further collaboration and they lead parents and community members to greater roles in educating students. The actions of teachers working in collaborative teams, adding their feedback and leveraging their influence results in well-informed and effective decisions for students, teachers and the school community.

What does fostering professional growth and teacher leadership look like in practice?

The primary purpose of implementing these structures is to provide feedback, propose solutions and assist leaders in making decisions (i.e., shared decision making). Where there are teams of teachers working together in the organizational structure of schools, there are changes in work routines and relationships, and increased involvement in decision-making (Leithwood et al., 1997). Rather than operating in isolation or feeling as if one must have all the answers or be an expert, leaders should work to develop collaborative structures that support learning and instruction, through sharing successful practices with their colleagues. Leaders and teachers, themselves, need to be learning every day.

Practice 5: Support of Team Collaboration

Leaders (both teachers and administrators) play a crucial role in supporting the conditions for successful cultures of district, school and collaborative teams. Collective teams are more effective when leaders fully engage as participants and provide needed support. When teams of educators meet consistently and with purpose, collective efficacy can develop when common teaching strategies produce greater student learning.

Why is supporting team collaboration important?

Previous research has shown that collaboration can enhance collegiality, increase team efficacy and contribute to teacher professional development (Nelson et al., 2008). When confronted with changed scenarios and altered environments, such as the global pandemic, supporting team

collaboration is vitally needed, required and expected on the part of those educators entrusted with leadership responsibilities. As a result, leaders play a significant role in modeling and prioritizing the importance of collaboration among colleagues during uncertain times.

What does supporting team collaboration look like in practice?

A shared leadership model can only be as effective and successful as the collective inquiry and efficacy of the team. Supporting this collective inquiry means that the building or district leader has trust in the process and is able to relinquish control of the work to the teams. Once a leader is able to do this, they can spend their time and energy to further develop their own self-awareness and reflection as they grow professionally.

Practice 6: Engage in Reflective Practice

Collective inquiry and reflection are keys to organizational success (Fullan, 2005). Leaders can provide time and space to their team for reflective practice. Reflection can work to help build consensus that keeps the team moving forward and provides an opportunity to voice their reflections as a key outcome. Reflective practice helps to integrate the other shared leadership practices together and ensure that focus is maintained on goals with desired outcomes for students and staff.

Why is engaging in reflective practice important?

Reflective practices support leaders in decision making which keeps the team moving forward in a positive direction. Taking a moment to pause and reflect (creating time and space) allows teams to be more thoughtful and strategic in their decision-making, rather than simply relying on the first suggestion or loudest voice. A rapidly changing environment requires teachers and leaders to engage in ongoing and continuous reflection in order to best leverage the collective knowledge, experience, and creativity of all team members. A structured reflective dialogue becomes even more critical for teachers to learn what is effective and apply their own learning to meet the needs of an ever-changing educational environment.

What does engaging in reflective practice look like?

Considerate and careful listening is the key ingredient in the reflective process. Reflection requires intentional planning that establishes the time and space dedicated to this practice. Leaders can enhance efficacy through the preparation of deeper reflective questioning and facilitating dialogue that moves beyond surface level considerations that impact decision-making. Additionally, reflecting on collaborative processes such as what went as expected, what was surprising and what could be different the next time the protocol, process or strategy is employed will result in continuous improvement of professional practice for leaders and teachers.

Practice 7: Celebrate Successes

Leaders spend a significant amount of their time focused on “fixing problems.” The pandemic has placed a significant amount of stress on schools and districts around the world. The result for leaders is intense pressure and an overwhelming feeling that enough is not being done. Leaders need to make sure that celebrating success becomes embedded in their school and district

cultures. The explicit acknowledgement of success by the leader sets the tone and allows teams the opportunity to both understand and celebrate their impact.

Why is celebrating successes important?

Celebrating successes in a genuine and authentic way can foster continued team success. By celebrating success, leaders reinforce motivation and acknowledge progress toward the overall goal especially in times of uncertainty. Leaders can guide their celebratory process that can carry teams over to their next challenge and increase both self and collective efficacy.

What does celebrating success look like in practice?

Leaders can support celebrations through strategic use of staff meeting time, creating opportunities for teams to share successes, posting successes on school and district websites, directly communicating successes with staff and students, thanking people personally, using social media to acknowledge success and creating “spotlights” for high achieving teams.

Conclusion

Shared leadership consists of a set of intricately and intertwined practices that come together to move learning forward for students, teachers and staff. The implementation of these practices creates opportunities for school and districts to co-construct more equitable conditions that transcend the model of education being implemented by school and district leaders. Trust, empathy, diverse perspectives, teacher leadership, professional growth, collaboration, reflection and celebration serve as a roadmap for ensuring a pathway toward increased student achievement. Engaging in these practices will result in school cultures of high engagement and progress for each member of the community.

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