

# How to Build Leadership Capacity

**How can we promote learning and engagement for both adults and students? How can districts support collaborative school improvement efforts?**

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Several years ago, I had a conversation with a man considered to be an outstanding principal. I asked, "What happened at the school where you were last principal? Are the reforms still in place?"

"That has been a real disappointment for me," he lamented. "You see, conditions and programs at the school soon returned to the way they were before I got there."

Over the intervening years, I've held several similar conversations. "Returning to normal" is the usual story. It is not surprising that schools do not maintain their improvements. New principals and superintendents often come to a school or district with their own agendas. Or they respond to a charge from the superintendent or board to "turn this school around," "get us back on an even keel," "undo what the incumbent did," or "move us into the future." Such sweeping mandates ignore the history, passions, and qualities of an incumbent staff, choosing instead to import reforms that are both generic and popular.

Less often do new administrators hear, "This is a good school that is getting better. Structures are in place to continue the work. Teacher and parent leadership is strong. We need a principal who can co-lead this school in the direction it is already going."

Most schools cannot yet be described in these glowing terms—they have yet to reach the capacity to sustain improvements on their own. Whether the school is advanced or a beginner in reform, what it does not need is to start over. Each time a school is forced to start over, its staff and community lose some of their personal energy and commitment.

If we are to sustain our improvements and build on the strength and commitment of educators, we need to address



the capacity of schools to lead themselves. We need to rethink both leadership and capacity building.

## Rethinking Leadership

When we think about leadership, we are accustomed to picturing people in roles with formal authority, such as principals, vice-principals, directors, or superintendents. But we can view *leadership* as a verb, rather than a noun, by considering the processes, activities, and relationships in which people engage, rather than as the individual in a specific role.

Let's define *leadership* as the reciprocal learning processes that enable participants in a community to construct meaning toward a shared purpose. This definition is known as "constructivist leadership" (Lambert et al. 1995). Leadership in this context means learning among adults in a community that shares goals and visions. Leadership as learning involves these assumptions:

- *Leadership is not a trait; leadership and leader are not the same.* A leader is anyone who engages in the work of leadership.
- *Leadership is about learning that leads to constructive change.*
- *Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader.*
- *Leading is a shared endeavor,* the foundation for the democratization of schools.
- *Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority.* To encourage shared learning, superintendents and principals need to explicitly release authority, and staff need to learn how to enhance personal and collective power and informal authority (Lambert in press).

If leadership is everyone's work, it does not require extraordinary charismatic qualities and uses of authority. If teachers perceive the work as a natural outgrowth of their roles as professional educators, they are less likely to opt out, insisting, "I'm not a leader." Teachers have long attended to the learning of

students and themselves; leadership asks that they attend to the learning of their colleagues as well. The skills and dispositions of effective leaders include convening and facilitating dialogue, posing inquiry questions, coaching one another, mentoring a new teacher, and



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inviting others to become engaged with a new idea. This kind of leadership is naturally engaging and leads to broad-based participation.

## Framing Leadership

Building capacity in schools includes developing a new understanding of *leadership capacity*—broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership. Leadership capacity can be seen as a complex, interactive framework, with four types of schools and school communities. A caveat is needed here. Frameworks, matrixes, or scales somewhat artificially categorize human behavior. Individuals—and schools—have unique characteristics.

■ *School 1: Low Participation, Low Skillfulness.* Here, the principal often exercises autocratic leadership. Parents and community members tend to have

limited participation. Information flows from the principal to the staff (often originating with the district office), yet is rarely a two-way process. This information often includes rules that govern behavior and practices. Staff often attribute problems to children, family,

and the community rather than instructional practices. Collegial work is rare. Staff members—and parents and students—often express resistance by being absent from meetings or school.

Teachers rarely initiate new practices, although they may comply with mandates temporarily. Although students may initially show some improvement in achievement when staff members implement mandates, they rarely sustain these gains.

### ■ School 2: High Participation, Low Skillfulness.

The principal's style is often unpredictable or predictably disengaged. He or she may make unilateral

or surprising decisions, often depending on who is asking the question or requesting the action. Information tends to be sparse. Faculty meetings are often composed of "sit and git" sound bites without dialogue. No schoolwide focus on teaching and learning is evident; thus, both excellent and poor classrooms may exist. Many staff work with individual grants, projects, or partnerships that are disconnected from each other. Staff members may not concern themselves with nonachieving classrooms; referrals, attendance, and achievement differ across the school. Roles and responsibilities are unclear. Overall student achievement is often static, with higher achievement for students in particular socioeconomic and gender groups. The range of achievement from high to low is as broad as the range of quality.

■ **School 3: High Skillfulness, Low Participation.** This school tends to make concentrated efforts to provide for skillful leadership work for a few teachers and the principal, perhaps as a leadership team. These people may have had opportunities for training through a reform-oriented center, network, or coalition. There may be growing polarization among the staff, who may strengthen their resistance as they see favored colleagues leading a change effort. Teams have learned to accumulate and use data to make school decisions, although the data may raise objections or denials from other staff members. Staff caught in the middle (neither thoroughly involved nor disengaged) are often thoughtful allies but relatively unskilled in resolving conflicts. These teachers are unclear

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what role to play as tension increases between the "haves" and "have nots." Pockets of strong innovation and excellent classrooms tend to exist, but focus on student learning is not schoolwide. Student achievement may show only slight gains.

■ **School 4: High Skillfulness, High Participation.** This school tends to have high leadership capacity and broad-based participation. The principal and other leaders make concentrated efforts to include all staff in leadership development and decision making. Staff members have gathered evidence from existing sources or through action research and tend to base decisions on these data. The school has a clear purpose, focusing on student and adult learning. Information loops keep staff, parents, and students informed, with opportunities to discuss, clarify, and refine ideas as they are being formed—long before a final decision is made.

Roles and responsibilities are shared and blended, but clear. The school community tends to assume collective responsibility for the work of leadership and learning. Staff members consider themselves to be part of a professional community in which innovation is the norm. Student achievement is high across the student population and within each subgroup as well.

### A School on Its Way

New Century High School (a pseudonym) is moving up on the scale of leadership capacity. The school joined a reform network and developed an effective leadership team. The team led in many improvements, including the use of student data to inform decisions. Yet the harder they worked, the more they seemed to alienate some teachers.

"There are some missing pieces here," reflected one team member. "We may have to slow down to speed up." The team then focused on involving more staff, students, and parents in the leadership process. Team members began to converse with staff—to really listen and to engage everyone in schoolwide inquiry.

Six months later, New Century's professional culture is changing. Faculty meetings are devoted to dialogue about teaching and learning. The majority of the staff are involved in the reform effort. People feel that their voices are heard. There are fewer student referrals and failing grades. Schoolwide improvement now seems possible.

### Encouraging Leadership

Schools and districts need to create the following conditions if they are to build leadership capacity:

1. Hire personnel with the proven capacity to do leadership work, and develop veteran staff to become skillful leaders.
2. Get to know one another; build trusting relationships.
3. Assess staff and school capacity for leadership. Do you have a shared purpose? Do you work collaboratively?

Is there a schoolwide focus on student achievement and adult learning?<sup>1</sup>

4. Develop a culture of inquiry that includes a continuous cycle of reflecting, questioning, gathering evidence, and planning for improvement.

5. Organize for leadership work by establishing inclusive governance structures and collaborative inquiry processes.

6. Implement plans for building leadership capacity—and anticipate role changes and professional development needs.

7. Develop district policies and practices that support leadership capacity building. These practices include district-school relationships built on high engagement but few rules and regulations, as well as shared decision making and site-based school management. Districts should model the processes of a learning organization.

Sustaining the momentum of our work in schools is essential if we are going to stay the course with program improvements long enough to know whether they succeed. We must institutionalize the processes of collaboration and collective responsibility. Building leadership capacity is not the next innovation, but the foundation for sustaining school and district improvements. ■

<sup>1</sup> For surveys and rubrics on leadership capacity, as well as extended case studies, see *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools* (Lambert in press).

### References

- Lambert, L., D. Walker, D. Zimmerman, J. Cooper, M. Lambert, M. Gardner, and P.J. Ford-Slack. (1995). *The Constructivist Leader*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
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