

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: THE CRITICAL ELEMENT IN SUSTAINING THE CULTURAL CHANGES OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

William Hall

Director of Educational Leadership &
Professional Development
Brevard Florida Public Schools

ABSTRACT

If improvement initiatives are to be sustained beyond the tenure of the leaders who initiate them, schools and districts must both promote widespread leadership throughout their organizations and commit to preparing the next generation of leaders. This article contends that when schools and districts operate as high-performing professional learning communities, they develop leaders at all levels and thereby create the conditions essential to continuous improvement. It offers six specific strategies for leadership development and calls upon schools and districts to overcome a tradition of inattention to this important topic.

“When the singer’s gone, let the song go on.”

Art Garfunkel
All I Know (Webb)

One of the most overlooked challenges facing public education is the lack of succession planning and management. The concept of formally and purposefully creating the capacity for developing and sustaining leadership is not something that most schools or school districts strategically consider. There is very little

information available on what schools and school districts can do to develop and maintain a pipeline of leaders for their systems after the Baby Boomers have long since retired. As a result of this inattention, changes in leadership typically result in changes in direction for schools and districts. As leaders depart, so do the improvement initiatives that they fostered. But as Michael Fullan (2005) concludes, “It is not discontinuity (of leadership) per se that is the problem in sustaining improvement but rather *discontinuity of direction*” (p. 31).

Schools and districts that do not create processes and structures that allow them to stay the course amidst changes in key leadership positions are more likely to drift from initiative to initiative and to watch with resignation as new superintendents and/or principals, abruptly change headings. The continuity of direction that results from internal leadership development can preserve the core of a school or district’s culture and allow it to stand strong against the buffeting winds of change despite new leaders taking over the helm.

The Professional Learning Community concept offers a powerful framework for addressing the leadership development and sustainability crisis facing public education because that concept regards administrators as leaders of leaders and teachers as transformational leaders in their own right (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Leadership development is a natural outgrowth, a subset of the PLC culture. Members of strong PLCs recognize that if they are to weather the storms of internal and external changes that swirl around them, leadership development must be a purposeful, planned, and formal component of their culture. Therefore, PLCs lay the foundation for developing leaders and leadership capacity as a means to create a critical mass of leaders who will sustain the focus on school improvement as key individuals come and go.

The best thinking in leadership has established that no single individual has the necessary skill and authority to bring about sustainable change in an organization (Collins, 2001; Kouzes and Posner, 1996; Kotter, 1996). Educational research offers the same

conclusion. In their analysis of 35 years of research on school leadership, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) concluded that the most effective leadership is characterized by a leadership team rather than individual. They also concluded that a strong leadership team is the natural outgrowth of a "*purposeful community*" (p. 99).

Powerful professional learning *communities* are inevitably characterized by widely-dispersed leadership. Leadership teams or guiding coalitions represent one important structure for dispersed leadership. Principals and superintendents in PLCs create and cultivate these guiding coalitions – people who trust each other and work toward a common goal. The critical tasks of implementing continuous improvement processes while, at the same time, sustaining the core values of the culture, fall not solely to a designated leader but to the entire leadership team.

Teacher teams represent another important structure for promoting leadership as members are called upon to develop skills in team organization, facilitation, and curriculum development and assessment (Mike Schmoker, 1999). The collaborative team structure, the fundamental building block of PLCs, is specifically designed to allow teacher leadership to flourish. Not only will one member be designated as the team leader, but every member of a collaborative team has the opportunity to demonstrate leadership when the analysis of results establishes that an individual has expertise and insights that can assist his or her colleagues. The situational leadership opportunities that occur through the day-to-day work of professional learning communities provide teachers with real-world experiences and applicable skills to be used when other leadership opportunities arise.

The collective inquiry and focus on results characteristic of PLCs are also particularly well suited to leadership development. Engaging in action research and data-driven decision-making initiatives gives school-based leaders opportunities to work with data

and grapple with the challenge of creating the shared knowledge necessary to achieve significant goals through collective efforts.

Finally, the ongoing learning required of members of PLCs certainly applies to leadership development. Powerful PLCs will provide teacher leaders with ongoing training in specific leadership and school improvement topics. More importantly, schools and districts committed to PLC concepts will create tiered leadership structures that provide multiple opportunities for leadership – leading grade level or course teams, departments, task forces, committees, summer programs, etc. Learning by doing is still the most powerful learning there is, and those committed to developing leaders will create the structures that allow lots of members of the organization to lead in increasingly more complex situations.

Here are six essential strategies to promote leadership development that should be in place in any school or district committed to sustained improvement:

1. Create a formal leadership development plan that strategically and systemically uses professional learning communities as a means to develop the leadership capacity of your personnel. The progress of this plan must be monitored on a regular schedule and the results reported to the district's senior leadership.
2. At the district level, develop a succession and management plan which identifies critical leadership positions in the district and spells out how the district will train and develop individuals to become eligible for those positions when they become available through promotion, retirement, resignation, etc.
3. Create a framework that provides for lateral and vertical capacity building throughout the organization. Identify specific activities and experiences that teacher leaders could take advantage of at the school level (for example, grade level chair, school improvement committee member, course or grade-level

team leader, mentor teacher, etc.), and provide administrators with experiences at the district level (for example, district-level committee work, membership on the Superintendent's administrators' advisory committee, filling in for a district-level administrator during a vacation period or long-term medical absence, etc.).

4. Develop leadership teams at each school. These guiding coalitions can help disperse the leadership load throughout the school by distributing responsibilities among the team members.
5. Put teachers into collaborative teams and appoint one teacher as leader of each group. Provide professional development for these teacher leaders and provide regular mentoring and coaching for them throughout the year.
6. Make leadership development a specific, essential job function of all administrative and supervisory job descriptions. Administrators and supervisors should be called upon to provide evidence of their attention to developing the leadership capacity of employees in their schools or departments, and their annual evaluations should address their commitment to and effectiveness in this critical area.

Schools and school systems that embrace professional learning communities cannot make the assumption that individuals who work in them will automatically become leaders. Leadership development does not and will not occur on its own. It will be more likely to take place when professional learning communities are regarded as environments in which developing leadership capacity co-exists with and is crucial to sustained, substantive school improvement efforts. Developing leadership potential and surviving the leadership changes that challenge our organizations is possible, but only if there is a structured, purposeful leadership development plan that uses the culture of professional learning communities as the means to sustain our improvement efforts.

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