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BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
for Caring and Successful Schools

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Building Capacity From Within

Changing the Adult Working Environment in Our Schools

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> *To exercise leadership today, leaders must institutionalize their leadership. . . . They must create or strengthen systems that survive them.*
>
> John W. Gardner (1995)

Strengthening the U.S. school system has been the focus of a frenzy of national reform activity in recent years.

Economic, social, and political trends, including the increasingly competitive but volatile global economy and changing demographics of the U.S. population, continue to propel fundamental changes in American schools (Murphy & Adams, 1998). Many of these changes have led to strong and persistent criticisms of education in this country (Trimble & Miller, 1996), and demands for more effective leadership and greater cohesiveness among those working in schools.

This chapter provides school leaders with practical, specific exercises designed to address these demands. We offer readers detailed descriptions of activities that School Leadership Teams have found useful in transforming an often mundane ritual, the faculty meeting, into a time of "reunion and renewal" for staff. Concrete examples are given that illustrate how teams have used these activities in their own schools to increase cooperation and collegiality among faculty, improve school climate and staff morale, and develop and institutionalize healthy practices. With increasing demands for improved school leadership, guidelines like these have never been more valuable, relevant, and timely.

BACKGROUND

Responding to a variety of criticisms of the modern American school system, educational reformers have long called for improved leadership for our schools (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). Administrators who were trained to be managers are now expected to be leaders, with such responsibilities as creating shared visions, developing collaborative decision-making processes, enabling teacher success, fostering collaborative team relationships, and promoting teacher development (Neufeld, 1997). Strong collaborative skills have surpassed strong bureaucratic skills as important qualities needed for effective school leaders (Payzant & Gardner, 1994). These changes have dramatically highlighted the importance of participatory leadership and administrators' interpersonal skills as they promote staff ownership of change and create an effective internal support structure (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992).

Practicing administrators themselves have repeatedly noted personal needs to develop a new set of knowledge and skills

essential for effectiveness as leaders in education today. Goddard (1997) surveyed 193 principals in Nova Scotia regarding their priorities for professional development and training opportunities. The most frequent responses included requests for techniques for increasing positive community involvement, techniques for improving staff relations, and strategies for building school culture and climate.

Similarly, Neufeld (1997) examined the perceptions of 23 urban middle school principals regarding their needs for professional development and training. These administrators spoke specifically about desiring additional knowledge and skills around the meaning and practice of leadership and the creation of a positive school culture. For example, they understood the importance of engaging teachers and others in creating a shared vision for their schools but did not know how to accomplish this task. They acknowledged a responsibility for facilitating goal setting, problem solving, and team building but were lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to address these issues effectively. Varner (1998) described the frustration that teachers experience when their principal is not knowledgeable about their needs. She suggested that principals must learn how to lead people through change and how to run highly efficient and effective meetings that get all the issues on the table.

Administrators, researchers, and reformers are increasingly recognizing the critical need for school leaders to "create and strengthen systems that survive them." One strategic method for addressing this need, which has emerged as a common theme throughout the research, is the development of effective school management teams. Creating and maintaining collaborative, competent teams of administrators, faculty, and parents contribute to a positive school climate and culture, and to the development of a shared vision for schools. In addition, "creating and sustaining effective [management] teams may provide an answer to the shortcomings of large schools and the isolation of teachers and students" (Trimble & Miller, 1996, p. 36). According to Lambert (1998b), building school-based leadership capacity is critical if we are to maintain and improve the strength and commitment of educators. For the past 14 years, the Princeton Center for Leadership Training has been building the capacity of schools and school personnel to develop and maintain effective school

management teams, also referred to as School Leadership Teams or Action Teams.

The work of the Princeton Center reflects a belief that building a strong foundation of healthy relationships among faculty, administrators, and parents is at the core of school reform. If this element is missing, it can disrupt or even prevent a school from instituting necessary changes. Creating a healthy social and emotional working environment for teachers must become a top priority before they can institute significant improvements in their students' learning environment.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A HEALTHY WORKING ENVIRONMENT?

Members of a school's faculty constitute a group; they are a collection of individuals sharing certain common circumstances. Like all groups, faculty will progress through a set of developmental stages—forming, norming, storming, and performing. Schools that pay attention to these stages and establish rituals and other healthy practices on an ongoing basis reap the benefits of high teacher morale, cooperative and collegial professionals with a shared passion for teaching and learning, and a climate that supports risk-taking and "reflective" conversation.

Redesign Faculty Meetings

One practical way to introduce these healthy practices, and to give school personnel time to experience and reflect on these practices, is by redesigning faculty meetings. Most schools hold faculty meetings for at least 1 hour each month, yet few attendees value these sessions or use them to promote more positive working relationships among faculty and administrators.

School Leadership Teams can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to lead their faculty through a process of "reunion and renewal." Using the four group stages as a guide, faculty meetings can be restructured to introduce new practices, with time for small group exchange, debate, dialogue, and reflection.

Forming

Most veteran staff members remember what it was like when they first joined the faculty of their school. An exercise titled "Reviewing Our History: Then and Now" gives staff members an opportunity to share significant events and turning points throughout the school's history—usually from the 1960s to the present. A time line is placed on one wall of the room, and teams of teachers and administrators place their initials on the year that they first began working at the school, along with a descriptive phrase that depicts their first impressions of it. Then, anywhere along the continuum that significant events occurred, staff members describe what happened (and when) that affected the climate of the school. Next, beginning with the most veteran member of the school, a story unfolds about each member's experiences, building on the central themes that become apparent as the collective history is shared. Following this exercise, staff members have an opportunity to step back and reflect on how people's relationships were formed and how events have affected those relationships over time. Historical patterns emerge that continue to affect the climate and culture of the school, and faculty can take notice and agree to let go of destructive forces from the past while building on strengths and reinforcing positive events.

One such example was the realization from the staff of an urban middle school that they were still mourning the loss of two students and a faculty member who were killed in separate accidents more than 10 years ago. These traumatic events, all occurring within several years of each other, rocked the foundation of the school, and the faculty had never recovered. The faculty had become cautious and distrustful and unwilling to invest in collaborative professional endeavors. "Reviewing Our History" was a much-needed wake-up call for the faculty that resulted in a cathartic grieving and letting-go process, followed by a reemergence of commitment and passion for teaching.

Norming

Faculty meetings can also be a place to review a set of internal norms and staff practices that affect the way people get along and work together. One exercise that can help faculty assess their

Figure 7.1   Exercise: How Are We Doing?

How Are We Doing?

An Assessment of Our School's Norms and Healthy Practices

Directions: Consider the following internal norms and healthy practices for staff. Identify three areas of strength and three that need work.

- The way we communicate
- The way people treat each other
- The way we begin each day
- The way we end each day
- The way conflicts or problems are handled
- The way staff is assigned to tasks
- The way decisions are made
- Work standards
- Attendance
- Planning time
- Faculty meetings
- Faculty inservice
- Professional development opportunities
- Others:

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school's culture and climate is called "How Are We Doing?" (Figure 7.1). Interdisciplinary teams of faculty identify three practices that they value and appreciate and three practices that need work. Teams collect examples of how each practice is played out and the effect it has on the working environment. Teams report their findings to the entire faculty and, collectively, the practices that need the most work are identified. Teams then brainstorm ways that new rituals can be introduced to address the areas that need work. For example, a faculty in one large high school noted that the way they began each day felt isolating and unfriendly— both for staff and students. By introducing a new ritual, piped-in soft classical music throughout the school for the first 5 minutes of the day, everyone felt more relaxed and connected to one another.

Figure 7.2   Exercise: Straight Talk With Colleagues

Straight Talk With Colleagues

	Name of person receiving feedback	What I appreciate	What gets in the way	What I need from you
Person 1				
Person 2				
Person 3				
Person 4				

Storming

In many schools, faculty and administrators get stuck around "storming" issues, holding on to grievances, insults, and disappointments for months and even years. Imagine a school climate that supports the belief "we agree to disagree"; a climate that fosters sharing diverse perspectives on teaching and learning; and an atmosphere that supports opportunities for colleagues to give and receive constructive feedback. Faculty meetings are an excellent place to hold periodic "Straight Talk" sessions, a practice that can address storming issues directly and, in many cases, prevent long-term storming conflicts from escalating and becoming a destructive force among the faculty. "Straight Talk" involves identifying one to five colleagues who agree to provide each other with feedback. First, each person writes down all of the things that he or she appreciates about each member participating in the process. Then he or she identifies (a) what is getting in the way of their working relationships and (b) what he or she needs from the other person to strengthen the professional bond. With Straight Talk forms completed (see Figure 7.2), one member of the group receives feedback from each person, in turn, without any interruptions, except asking for clarification, if needed.

After a person has received feedback from all members of the group, the feedback recipient summarizes what he or she heard others say and thanks group members for sharing. At no time do members of feedback teams explain their behavior or get into conversations about what they heard. By practicing Straight Talk

on a regular basis in a structured setting, staff members learn, firsthand, the effect they have on others and can modify behavior and attitudes, should they want to respond to constructive feedback.

This process is most useful for members of an academic team or long-standing committee. When members of a staff become more adept at giving and receiving this kind of feedback, it begins to occur more frequently as a matter of course in day-to-day operations of the school. In some cases, faculty may want to expand this process to include participating in a more comprehensive, 360-degree feedback exercise that assesses colleagues in the areas of job knowledge, planning and organization, initiative and resourcefulness, professionalism, dependability, teamwork, and communication.

Performing

Schools are in the business of performing; unfortunately, school personnel are asked more and more to perform new tasks in record time with limited resources. On top of this, we have now added the expectation that faculty and administrators will collaborate on everything from designing a new curriculum to restructuring the way they use time, space, and resources in schools. It is not surprising that frustration is high when the people involved in shared decision making lack the tools to plan and communicate effectively in teams.

One way to illustrate "what can go wrong" with school team efforts is the exercise "Blindfold Adventure." The task is simple: Everyone (up to 20–30 people on a team) is blindfolded and cannot speak while forming a straight line in reverse-alphabetical order by first names. The scene is predictable: Some people stand frozen, waiting to be rescued. Others latch on to anyone and get into some semblance of a line—not caring what the order looks like. A few brave souls may try to organize the group by attempting to create a system of communicating, for example, drawing the first letter of their names on the hands or backs of participants. This activity gives people an opportunity to create order from chaos, although the many obstacles placed in their way make their goal difficult to achieve.

The learning comes when the blindfolds are removed and a discussion ensues:

- How would you describe the way this group worked together to accomplish its task?
- What are some of the obstacles that got in the way; how were these obstacles similar to or different from those we face in collaborative decision-making efforts at school?
- What kinds of leadership emerged during this exercise; what was missing?
- What have we learned from this experience about the essential ingredients needed to work effectively on teams?

Have More Participatory Faculty Meetings

Faculty meetings can give staff time to practice their problem-solving and communication skills by introducing familiar hands-on activities. In the "Building Bridges" exercise, teams have a limited amount of time to construct a bridge using only straws and straight pins. The bridge has to be strong enough to support a person's shoe while also being evaluated on its beauty and originality. Sometimes leaders are assigned a specific role that affects the dynamics of the group.

In "Broken Squares," team members are each given an envelope with geometric shapes in it. The goal for the group is to create a square of equal size for each member. Without talking, members may share their pieces of the puzzle with others, but they cannot ask for or take another piece, even though they may need it to carry out the task. In both of these examples, teams share a common experience while discovering their multiple talents, individual areas of expertise, and the benefits of using their collective emotional intelligence to reach common goals—important lessons for real-life problem-solving efforts in the future.

CONCLUSION

If leaders in education are to respond effectively to increasing demands to strengthen the school system, they must recognize the potential for improvement that already exists within the school structure. They can "strengthen systems that survive them" by introducing and developing healthy practices that address the needs of faculty in a naturally occurring forum—the

faculty meeting. Through small but strategic changes in a common routine, school leaders can infuse the climate and culture of our schools with ongoing opportunities for collaboration, team building, support, reflection, and growth.

Attending to the stages of group development with practices such as those described here allows School Leadership Teams to change the agenda of faculty meetings. They become places for teachers and administrators to exchange ideas, review strengths, identify areas that need work in their professional working environment, and experience firsthand how to solve challenging problems in a collaborative spirit. As faculty meetings take on these new purposes, educators' roles and functions begin to transform. "As roles change, relationships change. People see each other in a new light. They recognize new skills and resources in people they have known for years" (Lambert, 1998a, p. 20). These changes begin the process of reunion and renewal within the adult working environment of the school. There is no better way to have a significant impact on student learning environments than to do just that—to build the capacity from within.

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