Stages of Team Development

Lessons from the Struggles of Site-Based Management

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERISTY

One major focus of the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is developing and supporting educational leadership with the vision and expertise needed to transform schooling. The Institute's Leadership initiative seeks to influence, support, and sustain models of shared leadership (teacher, principal, superintendent, community) that help to improve student achievement.

As part of its work in promoting effective leadership practices, the Leadership initiative staff convened a group of practitioners affiliated with the Institute's programs to reflect on and write about innovative and effective leadership. Ten of the resulting essays were published in a two-part series on Leadership for Learning in the September 2000 and June 2001 issues of Phi Delta Kappan. A shorter version of "Stages of Team Development" appeared in the June 2001 segment.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform was established at Brown University in 1993. Its mission is to develop, share, and act on knowledge that improves the conditions and outcome of schooling in America, especially in urban communities and in schools serving disadvantaged children. The Institute pursues its mission in four initiative areas: Leadership, Opportunity and Accountability, District Redesign, and Community-Centered Education Reform.

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> Organization wants to happen. Human organizations emerge from processes that can be comprehended but never controlled.
>
> – Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers
> *A Simpler Way*

We had sensed for some time that something was wrong – site-based management had not been delivering the goods. We formed leadership teams; they met; we shared decision making – but teaching and learning didn't change. "Perhaps too much had been expected from simply the transfer of power," suggest Priscilla Wohlstetter and Susan Albers Mohrman, who have written an extensive study looking at the outcomes of sharing decision making in schools. The idea always was to improve education for kids; but instead what seemed to have happened in many places was that there was another meeting to attend and nothing much else was new. "Is the theory flawed? Is the current wave of decentralization just another swing of the pendulum?" ask these authors, whose study of practice looked at thirty schools in nine school districts, each of which had at least four years' experience with school-based management.

We were asking ourselves the same questions. As principals of alternative high schools in New York City, we each had been deeply involved in school reform for over fifteen years. Each of our schools struggled incessantly with "group management" at Satellite Academy High School and consensus-based decision making at University Heights High School. During this time, our own experiences and observations, combined with those shared in professional development opportunities with colleagues in other New York schools and around the country, helped us learn a number of valuable lessons.

We saw for ourselves the tremendous power that can be generated within a school when the professional staff genuinely experiences a sense of ownership. But we learned that adult empowerment, for its own sake, is too limited a goal. We found that adult ownership, while necessary, does not in and of itself make learning more powerful for students. We learned how to get beyond ownership as a goal and how to develop professional communities of learners, focused on teaching and learning, that are able to take advantage of the multiple perspectives a community can offer.

Our conclusions, based on hands-on experience, are supported and illuminated by research findings in recent literature. Michael Fullan (1993) cites several studies of site-based-management projects, none of which found evidence of a strong connection between shared decision making per se and student learning. "The point is not that participation in decision making is a bad thing," Fullan cautions, but "that it is not focusing on the right things – the cultural core of curriculum and instruction."

Participation may be necessary in order to build the habits of collaboration, which are essential, but it is not sufficient for improving student outcomes.

Robert Evans (1996) explores the *kinds* of shared decision making that do create a link between adult empowerment, student learning, and leader behavior. "Teachers who are empowered to make decisions about their school will structure their classrooms to empower students in the learning process, encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their own education," he asserts. "A key point … is that empowerment's true target is not teachers or any other constituency, but the school. … To achieve it requires an authentic leader to take the primary role in both shaping the framework and nurturing the capacity of others to help shape it."

Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995) show that higher student achievement has been directly linked to the building of professional communities – groups of educators who regularly meet to discuss each other's work and to learn from each other about ways to improve teaching and learning. Newmann's work on authentic learning (1996) points out why some schools in his study had higher student achievement than others. In addition to focusing on student learning, the achieving schools nurtured professional community inside the school and understood that "the promotion of intellectual quality and professional community depended on a complex interaction of cultural and structural conditions."

The most fundamental conclusion we have drawn is that learning to share decision making in a professional community that focuses on student learning is a developmental process, and each stage of that process offers discrete challenges and opportunities. When teachers form teams in their classrooms, the student groups will go through these stages. When superintendents work with principals, or their own staff, the same lessons apply. Just as it is useful to remember that our children will and must go through the terrible twos, it's comforting to remember that even our adult communities will and must go through stages in their development and will have to work through some fairly predictable problems in order to emerge in a more mature state.

We now fully appreciate that the driving question underlying this journey is not "When does shared decision making work and when does it not work?" but rather "What do you have to do to develop a professional community to the point where it is promoting rigor in teaching and learning throughout a school?" We also know that leadership is essential to the successful negotiating of this journey. And we don't mean only principal leadership; teachers, parents, students, and district administrators must all play essential leadership roles.

The observations that follow illustrate the developmental stages that faculties go through en route to becoming learning organizations. Are these stages as clear-cut and neat as we make them sound? Of course not. We've lived through these steps, and, like anyone who has worked with groups, we know that little can be predicted and much can go wrong. But these observations represent years of reflection, and we strongly believe that a thorough understanding of such a complex conceptual framework – one which requires endless work and struggle to implement truly and honestly, but which has the potential to genuinely transform what happens in classrooms for kids – is an indispensable tool on this journey. In that spirit, we would like to share our experiences – some joyous, some not – about how that process plays out, what each stage involves, and what is needed to work through each stage and move on to the next.

The Honeymoon Stage

Emerging Community

This is terrific! Before, I was powerless; nobody even asked my opinion. Finally, I'm part of a group that meets with the leader. At last, I feel valued; I am so happy that my voice is going to be heard.

I'm not always comfortable disagreeing with the group, so far, especially when I have to do it publicly, but it is exciting to feel that we will be able to make real change; soon we'll be making a lot of important decisions.

The eager group may begin by thinking that this is going to be easy. It may forget to build, earlier rather than later, some common goals. Is the intent to give everyone a voice, or is it to improve the intellectual quality of the school? Making decisions without a clear sense of mission or shared vision can create a battleground for personal interests. Now is the time to clarify the method of making decisions: why to make them, how to make them, and which ones are appropriately made by the group. The leader must unapologetically set limits to the scope of the group's initial work. These limits can be open to discussion, but to pretend that everything is up for grabs creates a lack of security inappropriate for group health.

The leader must also be prepared to share and move toward a vision of greater group involvement based on capacity and on priorities. Problems can be averted if consensus is introduced early as the mode. Voting leads to factions, polarization, and a history of resentment, since there are always losers along with the winners. Consensus means having to look for the win-win solution, which is not the same as seeking a 100 percent vote and being held hostage by the hold-outs.

The leader's role in this stage is that of designer. Groups are powerful, not in spite of, but because of having multiple points of view. A variety of viewpoints, however, does not necessarily produce the most creative outcomes. When a group is in the early stages of working together, it does not yet have a lot of collective knowledge. It is sometimes useful for the leader to solicit input, envision a design, and then present a plan to the group. The group can digest it, modify it, and then look for agreement. Another strategy is for the group to brainstorm possibilities, with a small group or a leader putting it together into a design or plan.

What does not work is for a leader to come to the group and say, "How do you want to schedule classes? This is your school, so it's up to you to tell me what you want to do." There is something a bit hostile in this last approach. A leader had better be self-reflective and should be clear if sharing leadership is, in fact, what she/he wants.

Nancy bought bagels for her staff every Friday. It was to thank them for their hard work, a personal way of appreciating them. When students came into her office early in the morning and asked for bagels, she gave them to them as a reward for being early to school. One Friday a teacher expressed her sense that the bagels should be for the teachers only and "proposed" to the staff, for agreement, that there be no bagels for students. What Nancy had to point out was that these were her bagels, purchased with her money, and she was going to give them to whomever she wanted. The teacher in the glow of the Honeymoon Stage thought that teachers would now make decisions about everything that happened in the school. It was disappointing to her to find out that the Friday bagels were not in her purview.

The Conflict Stage

The Honeymoon Is Over

Who made *that* decision? I can't buy in unless I'm a part of what's going on.

I can't work with that group.

We are supposed to be talking about instruction, but we keep arguing about career day, the new schedule, the budget for art supplies, and who's going to teach that split program. When are we going to work on something of substance?

Sometimes I feel like going back to my classroom and closing the door; working with kids is easy compared to this!

This is a natural (and valuable) stage for groups – the stage of emerging controversy. And group development theory tells us that not only is this inevitable, but it is essential to developing a healthy group. "In fact, a group without conflict may be in serious difficulty; points of view are being masked and inhibited, and good solutions cannot be worked out" (Miles 1971). Whether it's a group of two (a marriage) or one hundred (the U.S. Senate), where there are different people, there are different points of view. What really matters is how you learn to deal with those differences. So the very same conflict resolution principles we use for students apply to adults as well: an absolute insistence upon resolving (not hiding) conflicts – combined with a few ground rules for civil discourse – should do nicely for starters.

It is helpful to warn the group that this stage will come – before it happens. Knowing that conflict is inevitable will lessen anxiety. The group would do well to avoid being overly nice – trying to smooth things over, ignoring problems. Dealing with petty dilemmas skillfully will allow the group to venture into the important (and difficult) issues – ones about teaching and learning. Everyone has to learn how to be a negotiator and/or mediator.

The leader's role in this stage is to help the group manage conflict. First, the leader must make sure that all are committed to working on conflict management. The temptation to avoid dealing with conflict leads to resentment-collection and to the mediocrity that comes of too much compromise. There is also the temptation on the part of the group to revert to being top-down because it's "easier" or "clearer," and this must be acknowledged and stopped. The leader should resist the urge to say, with pride, "See, they *want* me to make all the decisions."

The leader in this stage is both a mediator and a teacher of mediation and negotiation. "In the schools in which faculty members were direct with one another and had developed processes for airing controversy, the faculty made changes that endured and grew stronger over time. Where faculty members had no capacity to deal with controversy they were unable to move beyond existing practices" (Wasley et al. 1997). Effective leaders have the courage to confront difficult issues of race, gender, class, etc. But they also "move from being the ones who manage conflicts among group members to being the ones who teach group members how to manage their own conflicts" (Schwarz 1994).

However, effective leaders do not allow the group to be used to settle issues that belong in face-to-face, private conversations: "People around here

are late a lot; I think we should do something about it" could be a legitimate topic for a group to take on if it really is about a slippage in group norms. It could also be a cover-up for the speaker's unwillingness or inability to assertively confront one person who is chronically late.

Leaders must also help groups set norms. Good leaders do this publicly, taking every opportunity to reinforce them with the group. This might take the form of reviewing a written document or of routinely reminding people how certain events were consistent with shared agreements. This reinforcement comes from regularly reflecting on how the group is doing and on whether or not the norms are still the ones we believe are important. Leaders continually remind the group about "how we do things around here," especially when it has been tough to do the right thing. Norms are different from rules – we know we will sometimes fall back, but there are no recriminations when this happens.

In the early days of building a new school, Nancy found that each semester teachers were changing their teaching teams. At first she felt it was good to let people choose the teachers they wanted to work with and encouraged the staff to make adjustments in order to come up with the best configurations. The problem was that eventually there were some people who couldn't or wouldn't work with anyone else. Once she realized what was happening, she knew that it had to stop. The building of community in a school has to be more like marriage than dating. Problems have to be worked out. Issues have to be addressed. And you can't continually change partners rather than work things through. It became clear that the same thing had been happening in classrooms. Students (and teachers) looked forward to the next semester when they could change groupings, hoping that things would be better next time. The school realized that students and teachers became much stronger and wiser when they learned how to work out their differences and learned to stay together over time – leading to relationships where members had deeper knowledge of one another. When this happened, the teaching and learning could take place on a new level because teachers knew how individual students learned best and students knew that they could work out problems with adults. Adults and students could appreciate each other because of, not in spite of, all their complexity.

Alan's school, which had four sites, each with its own teacher-director, had had a history of competition among the sites. Resources were either strictly divided or they were allocated through a convoluted reliving of the history: "You got extra funding two years ago." "Remember that time we let you buy books? Now it's our turn." It took an enormous amount of work to redesign the culture of the school to become one in which the greater good could be the deciding factor in how allocations were made. Sites began to see themselves as part of a whole instead of as rival factions. How was this done? The only way changes to a culture take place: over time and through constant reinforcement. Alan had to not only voice the new set of norms and beliefs, but also ensure that they were always being practiced. And he had to do this not as an authoritarian, but as someone whose responsibility it was to regularly remind the group of what it stood for and why it was there. And he had to do it over and over. It took several years; there just was no fast way. They all knew they had "arrived" when the management teams from all four sites readily agreed to a proposal from Alan that one site which was going through a particularly difficult transition be funded for an extra teacher for the entire year simply because they needed it. And rather than resent it, the members of the group spoke about feeling good about their collective ability to get beyond their individual interests.

The Confusion-about-Democracy Stage

What's the Leader Supposed to Do?

Sure, you say I'm empowered, but as long as we have a leader, he/she still holds all of the chips.

Sometimes decisions are made without me – why should I feel buy-in? Furthermore, who decides who gets to make which decisions? We need specific processes and procedures.

If we're a democratic group, why does the leader have more influence than I have? If we're all leaders, why do we need someone in charge? There's always a hidden agenda.

I may be ready for empowerment, but I'm not so sure about the others. I don't know if they're as committed/talented/trustworthy as I am. Maybe it's better to just forget about it and let the leader do it all – then at least we know who to blame.

"The role of school management – principals and superintendents – has not received much attention in SBM [school-based management] plans," Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1996) note. "Private sector experience has found that such roles are pivotal in successful decentralization." Groups come to learn that the roles that leaders play are essential – after all, who is going to push us when we get stuck, do that work we'd rather not do, and remind us of our agreements? In fact, without a strong leader making sure these things happen, our "democratic" process sometimes stalls because one or two people dominate the conversation and we all get disgusted. Evans (1996) calls this kind of leadership "authentic":

> Authentic leaders … want to optimize collective involvement and professional community, but … they will not sacrifice substance for process, clarity and focus for a management modality. They do not abandon traditional authority; they use it judiciously, building involvement as they can in a variety of informal as well as formal ways, but asserting themselves as they must. They provide a binary leadership that is both top-down and bottom-up. In this way they avoid the pitfalls that can turn empowerment and collaboration into quagmires and they help school communities deepen the commitment on which improvement depends.

Leadership can vary and move around, but when it comes down to it, no matter how much decision making is shared, there does have to be someone who is in charge – and we have to know who that is. Otherwise, we all can spend an inordinate amount of time either duplicating each other's efforts or waiting for someone to be decisive.

This stage can be confusing to everyone. Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1996) state that "studies of effective public schools agree that a strong central leader, like the principal, is key to successful management. An effective leader can set the school's vision, serve as an instructional leader, coordinate reform efforts and rally support for the school." Yet, in the same document, under "Why School-Based Management Fails," the authors caution that

> principals who work from their own agenda, not helping to develop a common one … are perceived as too autocratic by their staffs. … [T]his often led to a power struggle between teachers and the princi-

> pal over who controlled the school. … Teachers frequently referred to "the principal's vision" in schools where the leadership was autocratic.

Making sense of all of this is not impossible, but reconciling concepts which seem to be in opposition to each other is what makes the job of the leader so complex and so far above the more clear-cut management hierarchies of the past.

Leaders at this stage must strive to prevent the group from falling into "process worship," where following the procedures and processes, designed to make sure that voices are heard, becomes the goal rather than the means to an end. Allowing processes to become a substitute for using judgment can lead to well-executed but terrible decisions. Or even worse, it can lead to stagnation and frustration. It's the leader's job to regularly prioritize and reprioritize and help the group to keep straight what's important.

The leader needs to make sure that the changes that are taking place are systemic, not cosmetic. "Schools struggled with SBM when they simply layered SBM on top of what they were already doing" (Wohlstetter and Mohrman, 1996). The leader must not be seen as playing favorites and must keep the process honest. The leader must teach all of the players to develop the habit of consulting one another regularly and must facilitate that consultation, making sure that it happens. And then the leader has to help the group see that it has a responsibility to not only trust each other but to trust the leader as well, just as the leader has trusted them. The leader both models and teaches inclusion. It is not good enough to say, "You had the opportunity to object, participate, etc." Opportunities not only have to be presented, but promoted. Involvement and involving others are not options. And the leader has to be comfortable being a leader.

One responsibility that must be assumed by everyone involved in an organization where shared decision making is taking place is to avoid the "in-crowd/out-crowd syndrome." Groups that work effectively within larger organizations understand that they must spend a lot of time communicating with those outside the group – and those outside the group have an equal responsibility for being willing to believe that the group's purpose is to help the whole and that being a good group member means not wasting one another's time. This means not whining, not forgetting the real reason you are all there.

Alan's school was confronted with a problem at one of the sites. There was a staff member who was not an effective teacher, and the staff wanted the teacher-director to deal with the problem. So he did … and asked the teacher to leave the school. Then the staff was upset, saying it was their right to make decisions and that they had wanted the director to deal with the problem, but not make a decision on his own. They were told that the decision would stand, but that there would have to be an immediate plan for an intervention process so that in the future whenever there was a personnel issue, it would be clear how it would be handled and the process would be known to everyone. There was resistance to making this plan. The crisis was over and they wanted to "move on." The leader had to insist. This is one example of a changing leadership role. While it was no longer appropriate for the leader to make unilateral decisions, it was essential to take the lead in making sure that there were procedures in place, ones which ensured democratic outcomes and which did not rely on peer pressure alone for accountability.

The Messy Stage

Now Things Are Even Less Clear

This team's work is sloppy; I need more clarity and control.

If this is supposed to make me feel "bought-in," it's not working. I'm working harder now and getting less done.

It's fun to be collegial, but where is it getting us?

I'm still not always comfortable with all of our decisions. Sometimes I don't even remember why I agreed to something. And when we have to include different perspectives – kids, parents, etc. – that really slows us down.

There's no time to do anything right, let alone get to the important issues.

Learning to love risk-taking and ambiguity is a tall order, but it has to happen. It's hard to celebrate mistakes and avoid the safe route. To help it happen, there must be systems in place to maximize communications among all of the members of the group. Instead of a clear line of authority that is very neat but not very effective, there can and should be multiple forms of communicating – a sort of circulatory system for the organism, one which keeps the blood moving.

The organization needs multiple groups with varied tasks and foci. This way the power is truly dispersed throughout the school and is not simply vested in one group instead of the principal. So the next time someone says, "What, another meeting?" there has to be a reminder that meetings, when well run, are truly valuable. The alternative would be to go back to a clear line of authority with meetings that are used only to transmit information, top-down. Meetings can themselves be learning experiences if run effectively, but that means planning and organization. Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1996) "found that school-based management required a redesign of the whole school organization that goes far beyond a change in school governance."

Another source of messiness is the need to include all stakeholders.

> Involving stakeholders … isn't enough to ensure all voices are heard. … Decisions that emerge from integrating multiple perspectives are bound to be better than decisions made by a single person or from a single perspective. Yet it takes time and skill to integrate multiple perspectives, especially when there are power differences among the diverse groups. This is a challenge worth meeting if school teams are to think creatively and in new ways to better serve all their students. (Hergert 1997)

The leader's role in this stage is to help the group be comfortable with messiness, pointing out that it's OK and is part of real life. "Comfortable" doesn't always mean relaxed and happy. When members of the group say, "I'm not comfortable with that," they can be gently encouraged to understand that their comfort is not the major goal of the school and that maybe their discomfort is a sign that there is learning taking place. The goal is to feel safe enough to indulge in risk-taking. The leader resists being "Father/Mother Knows Best" and continues to help the group appreciate that it can find a good

route, and that there is no one right answer. The leader cannot and should not try to prevent mistakes from happening. Mistakes should be welcomed, examined, and understood as natural phenomena – a necessary part of learning.

On the other hand, leaders must strive to develop those systems and communications that will eventually bring order out of chaos and follow up, follow up, follow up. Solutions have to be real. Miles (1990) distinguishes between traditional coping (e.g., using normal routines or working harder as the way to solve the problem) and "deep coping," which is doing whatever has to be done to solve the problem (e.g., change the schedule, provide time, make sure it happens). "Serious reform … is changing the culture and structure of the school," says Michael Fullan (1991). "As long as we have schools and principals, if the principal does not lead changes in the culture of the school, or if he or she leaves it to others, it normally will not get done."

The leader must also lead professional development. Leaders foster professional practice by putting in place processes and structures that promote teacher collaboration and collective responsibility (Lieberman et al. 1988, McLaughlin and Yee 1988). The leader plays a key role in fostering a sense of collective responsibility among the faculty such that problems of teachers' performance are viewed not as individual failure but as the concern of the whole faculty (McLaughlin and Yee 1988).

It is important for both the leader and the group to begin to see their work as engaging in problem solving and learning, rather than "problem hiding" (McLaughlin and Yee 1988). When the group focuses on learning, it finds that it is making better decisions and that its process becomes more and more seamless (and more efficient). As the group sees itself learning together through professional dialogue, through seeking out information and evidence, through self-reflection and a feedback process, then they are moving to becoming a professional community. The group and the leader are able to now use the skills they were developing in earlier stages. "Learning and improvement of performance will occur only from serious peer and group assessments of how well their own judgments are working" (Louis and Miles 1990).

There is a particular problem of messiness for the leader, who is expected to simultaneously strengthen cross-fertilization and collaboration; maintain calm, order, and the sense that someone is in control; promote strong cultural norms, values, and beliefs; and include everyone's voice in setting the agenda. Making sense of these seemingly disparate goals is the hard but critical work of the leader in this stage.

Nancy came to understand that her role as the professional development leader of the school meant that she not only had the responsibility to design and run professional development activities at staff meetings (where announcements were banned), but she also spent her entire day in a variety of meetings – leadership team, curriculum planners, office staff, long-term planners, etc. Each of these meetings was a part of the professional development web in the school. But the realization grew that it was simple enough to spend meeting time perseverating about details. So, the rule became that every meeting would have as half of its agenda a professional topic, and that the topic would come first, not after the business (when it frequently didn't happen at all). This became a school community habit and each team that met understood that its purpose, first and foremost, was to learn together, and this included reading articles and building on prior knowledge. For Nancy, as the principal, it meant doing all of those other principal's chores early in the morning and late in the day. She felt it was worth it to keep these multiple conversations going.

The Scary Stage

Where's the Authority and Accountability?

I know I said I wanted to be a part of a professional community, but maybe "they" do know better than we. Actually, I sometimes hope so, because I feel less and less sure about what should happen.

Whose fault is it if something goes wrong? Suddenly I don't feel so powerful, I just feel more of a heavy responsibility.

Where's the validation; what are the rules?

I'm just not sure I want to be responsible for talking about what's going on in other people's classrooms, about what standards should be, about what we should teach. After all, if we open that up, then I have to be willing to hear stuff about my own work, and that is truly scary.

Participation in making decisions does not in any way ensure that the group automatically takes on real responsibility for what happens; in fact, it can sometimes get the urge to back off and look around for someone or something to blame. Evans (1996) remarks that "few teachers, it seems, want to be fully empowered and collegial."

It is important that the group build an accountability system that ensures its work is based on substantive information and data and not solely on the opinions and preferences of its members. Accountability is built on the lateral flow of information sharing and on the group's ability to critique itself. It is in this stage that the group begins to see itself as a professional learning community rather than merely a decision-making group. It really is moving into genuinely shared leadership. Once this happens, the group sees that what makes a true professional community is a systemic approach to a "collective rather than individual accounting for school outcomes" (McLaughlin and Yee 1988). Now the group is shifting to an instructional focus and aligning its teaching practice with those values and beliefs by using reflective practice and dialogue.

What can be really scary is when there is no improvement in student performance after the group has been working so hard. Remember the findings: higher student achievement has been directly linked to the building of professional community (Newmann and Wehlage 1995). So the group has to make sure it is not only working hard, but working together in productive ways. Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997) describe some of the key conditions that foster teacher learning (see sidebar).

By now, the group will have a history of successfully dealing with challenges. The leader's role at this stage is to move the group from its initial successes toward the next stage: public accountability. The leader reminds the group of what has been learned and cites specific examples of the group exceeding its own expectations. The leader reminds the group that it has already been accountable in many ways and that institutionalizing a collective accountability is the last challenge. Having built in the habit of reflection, the leader will now find the group ready to be more publicly accountable. This will not, however, be an instinctive next step. The courageous leader starts by being self-reflective and then helps the group to hold a mirror up to itself.

KEYS TO FOSTERING TEACHER LEARNING

- Time: "Few faculty or central office staff or state departments have yet created adequate conditions for adult learning in their schools."
- Collegiality: "Despite the fact that we have understood the importance of collegiality for a number of years, most schools maintain a strong culture of individuality and isolation."
- Analytical capacity: "Reflective activity needs to be more critically analytical. … [Teachers] need to ask themselves why they are attempting new techniques; … then they need to examine whether the changes they are attempting are getting what they hoped for. … To be more critically analytical, teachers need to develop the skills of giving and receiving regular feedback on their work in classrooms."
- Expertise: "Teachers need a readily available support system of experts who are knowledgeable. … A common practice is to suggest that a teacher who has been out to a workshop function as the resident expert for the school. Unfortunately, sophisticated understanding takes a great deal more time and effort."

(from Wasley et al. 1997)

Peer assessment and accountability in Alan's school had, over the years, come to exist more in theory than in practice. People met in "peer groups," having found many reasons not to visit one another's classes; or, if they did visit, by all accounts they gave each other very superficial and very positive feedback. There was a growing concern that a number of teachers who were in need of substantial support and help were, in fact, not getting the kind of "critical friendship" they needed. In order to revitalize this theoretically existing procedure, Alan kept bringing the question to the table: What are we doing about this? Let's share examples. Let's be a problem-solving group. Why are we resisting? What is so difficult about giving and getting critical feedback? How can we stop letting ourselves off the hook? He would hear from staff members privately that they were concerned, but they were reluctant to say it out loud. His goal was to make that voice public. His job was not "enforcer" but "relentless advocate" for the group to grow and collectively look at the problem, to make sure that the environment was safe, that there was respect, and that there was a reduced tolerance for collective denial.

The Mature-Group Stage

A Professional Learning Community

Finally, we're proactive and make our own agendas rather than reacting to those of others. We also have learned to be inclusive and are avoiding "us" and "them" scenarios.

We have learned to focus on learning as a group rather than making decisions before we have enough knowledge. In fact, we have realized that the point is to make high-quality decisions – ones that are better because they include more points of view.

We realize that we have to give up some of our own preferences in order to see the bigger picture and to work on the common good. We can agree to delegate more often, and while we seek critical feedback, we don't waste each other's time in micromanagement.

Our meetings are themselves now professional development opportunities instead of battlegrounds for issues.

Now, finally, we're talking about teaching and learning and about raising standards, not merely "setting" them. And we're all taking responsibility for making sure that happens; we've stopped pointing the mental finger at one another.

The leader's role in this stage is to keep the group from becoming complacent, making it clear that "we'll probably never be 'there,' " and that there is always a next step in the cycle of assessment and reforming. But, at the same time, the leader helps the group appreciate the habits they have institutionalized and the cultural norms that support the progress that has been made.

In Alan's school, annual reports, a synthesis of teacher reflections, were written by each of the four sites. In order to maintain this valued but burdensome expectation, he instituted a process that improved its chances of being valued by the school community. Not only were copies shared with everyone (an accountability strategy) but the leaders of the sites spent two hours critiquing the overall report. Routinely, these reports were introduced by a reminder of the number of years the school had done this, and a ten-year timeline was developed tracing the critical growth of the school directly through these documents. And while everyone still found the process burdensome, no one would consider finishing out the year without an annual report. And everyone made sure their reflections were included.

The concept of the "church year" helped Nancy understand what she had to do in her school. Having grown up a minister's daughter, she was very familiar with the cycle but never quite understood its value. Every October there was an appreciation of the harvest. There were the same lessons, the same hymns, even the same colors used. In her school, it became clear that October had a different meaning – it was the "conflict month." After the "honeymoon" of September, there were inevitably squabbles among students and even among staff. It helped enormously to anticipate this and say, "October is coming." This reminded the school community to have conversations in family groups about handling conflict and to have staff meetings where there were reviews of the procedures needed and the ways to prevent conflict from becoming combat. Not only were new members of the community introduced to the habits and the culture of the school, but older members were honored for their roles in the school's history and at the same time had their memories jogged.

A Transforming Experience

In our years of evolving understanding about leadership, empowerment, and professional community, we learned, as principals, to be better learners and teachers ourselves. It was simply not good enough to hope learning would happen because we set up structures, brought in outside experts, and/or sent teachers to workshops. Authentic learning required an authentic learning community, one that learned from research, from its own experience, and from its own analysis of that experience. And all of that required that we do the same thing.

Forming a learning community was like planning for a class – and we learned that just as a good teacher would not dream of teaching in a rigid, arbitrary manner, neither would she/he initially turn it over to the students. Good teachers know it is their job to teach the students how to be good learners, how to take on responsibility, and how to value one another's voices. And good teachers do not leave it to chance. It's no different for good leaders.

We found that developing and participating in a genuine learning community, with shared decision making focused on student learning, is more than a task; it is a changed way of being. For a group to learn to see professional development as a collective rather than as an individual responsibility, it must challenge deeply ingrained ways of doing things. John Goodlad (1994) comments on this same realization in a broader forum:

> It is difficult for many and impossible for some groups and enterprises to align their self-interests with the public good, and that is what an educative role in the positive sense invariably requires. It is equally difficult for a public which was educated much more for individual development and competition than for personal responsibility and community welfare to sort out the degree to which adversaries are indeed locked in struggles that affect us all when one side claims to be for the common good. … Such matters are not part of the human conversation for most of us.

We also learned that a genuine learning community must never forget that building consensus and focusing on adult learning are not ends in themselves but only a starting place, a structure that works no miracles unless it is used wisely and well. These efforts are only really useful if student achievement is the overarching goal. Focusing on adult learning requires, paradoxically, that we not focus on ourselves, our needs, and our comfort level. Rather, our learning has to be about what works for kids, whatever it takes. Whenever we lose sight of that, we squander precious time and energy.

None of this happens overnight. By being prepared for the problems that adult groups will encounter as they struggle with how to work together effectively to increase student learning, educators can mindfully evolve, stage by stage, into true learning communities. They will learn to view power differently, to make learning more meaningful for kids, and maybe even to model a just and democratic mini-society.

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