EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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October 2013 | Volume **71** | Number **2**
Leveraging Teacher Leadership Pages 62-66

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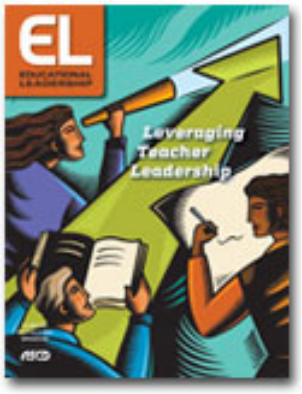

How Principals Cultivate Shared Leadership

Terry Wilhelm

In a shared leadership school, the principal maintains a delicate balance—giving teachers responsibility without abdicating all authority.

Traditional teacher leaders function in traditional ways, usually through the time-honored roles of department chair and grade-level chair. But with educators being held accountable for higher and higher student outcomes, schools need to make a major shift from traditional teacher leadership to shared leadership. Principals can no longer lead instructional reform alone: The voice and expertise of teachers are essential to improve teaching and learning. As Timothy Waters and the coauthors of *Balanced Leadership* (2009) write,

> The future demands on the school principal are massive. In order to meet the needs of all stakeholders, the principal needs to learn to share leadership responsibilities while understanding the implications of introducing change. (p. 8)

What's the Difference?

How do teacher leadership roles in a shared leadership school differ from those in a traditional one?

In a traditional school, the leadership team is typically composed of department chairs or grade-level representatives who meet periodically with administrators to discuss procedural and operational issues; they then take information back to their respective groups and perhaps gather input for the next meeting. These traditional teacher leaders may also have specific operational duties, such as ordering textbooks and supplies for their departments or making room assignments. They may also create agendas and keep minutes for their respective groups' meetings, which they submit to the administration.

In contrast, in a shared leadership school—often called a professional learning community—all adults continually learn together so that every student achieves at the highest levels. In my role as a consultant and facilitator, I have worked with such schools to help teacher leaders effectively guide and manage the work of

teams of course-alike or grade-level peers. At the secondary level, these teams are likely to be smaller and more specialized than an entire department; the math department, for example, may have four to six course-alike teams. The teams, led by teacher leaders, work directly in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Their chief concern is student learning.

Back at the traditional site, the typical reaction to the idea of teachers taking on leadership roles in areas directly related to improving student learning might be summed up in the statement, "That's administration's job." Thus, one of the most dramatic—and probably most important—ways that teacher leader roles change in a shared leadership school is that teachers feel an increased sense of ownership for improving student outcomes throughout the school, not just in their classrooms. At one middle school where I facilitated teacher leadership team development, a teacher leader put it this way at the end of the first year: "At our school, it's no longer 'my kids.' Now, it's 'our kids.'"

The Principal's New Role: Trainer of Trainers

To create a shared leadership school, the principal must become a staff developer. This does not mean the principal must become a star trainer for delivering whole-staff professional development; teacher leaders can eventually assume those roles, if and when whole-staff professional development is appropriate. But most professional development will occur in the course-alike or grade-level team meetings led by the teacher leaders. Thus, the principal must become the informal trainer of trainers for the teacher leaders because, unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs offer nothing to help teachers develop the skills required for a shared leadership role. These skills include

- Leading colleagues in analyzing student work and achievement data.
- Facilitating group discussions about improved instructional practices.
- Locating research-based methods and strategies that may be outside the current collective team expertise.
- Putting structures in place for team members to hold one another accountable for trying and using the strategies.
- Comparing results for various strategies tried.

Simply assigning teachers to teams and asking them to collaborate in these new ways reminds me of putting students into groups and expecting cooperative learning to occur like spontaneous combustion. As a teacher, I initially found cooperative learning so frustrating that I put the students right back into rows after a couple of failed attempts. They didn't know how to cooperate! No more cooperative learning for them! The real problem, obviously, was that I didn't know how to teach them to cooperate.

I am happy to report that in time, I became a fairly proficient practitioner of cooperative learning—but it required both training and practice. More important, it also required a fundamental shift in the way I saw my own role. I understand in hindsight that being a slightly Type-A teacher, I really preferred to be at the front of the room running the show myself.

Principals may have similar trouble relinquishing control. The willingness to share leadership is the necessary precursor to developing the new skills they need to become a trainer of trainers for their teacher leaders. The willingness must come first, derived from the principal's authentic perception that shared leadership will be superior to solo leadership.

Common Missteps

With no formal preparation for sharing leadership, some principals convene leadership teams with the intent of sharing leadership, but then fail to provide the support the teacher leaders need. For example, one principal asked his team leaders to have their teams identify their top-10 items to include in the district's new quarterly benchmark assessments; he failed, however, to inform the staff as a whole of the initiative and did not work with the team leaders to help them learn how to facilitate such a discussion. Without any symbolic authority for the task, and with no preparation, the team leaders encountered so much pushback from their peers that the initiative simply died, leaving the teacher leaders feeling burned and disenchanted.

Sometimes principals start down the path of shared leadership, but then they don't allow the teacher leaders to participate in meaningful leadership tasks for the school, perhaps because they fear losing control. For example, one principal convened a new leadership team after attending a conference on professional learning communities with some key teacher leaders. The discussions were initially enthusiastic, but as time passed and none of the ideas and initiatives moved forward, the team members concluded that this was just another passing fad.

Sometimes a misguided principal may completely abdicate important aspects of leadership to the wholly unprepared leadership team. Vital schoolwide decisions are neglected and key responsibilities go unfilled because the bewildered teacher leaders do not see themselves as the ones who should take care of such responsibilities—nor do they have the skills or symbolic authority with peers that are necessary for success.

In one cohort of leadership teams, a passionate discussion arose in a team meeting about student interventions. Strangely, the principal began texting on her cell phone; she eventually pushed her chair away from the table as the confused team members were looking to her for direction. Not surprisingly, the team could not agree on what action to take, and almost every team member privately expressed considerable frustration after the session. As the session facilitator, I questioned the principal later about what I had observed. She responded, "I wanted them to make the decision." She had clearly misjudged the situation, overestimating her team's readiness and missing all their signals that her guidance and participation were essential.

As the term *shared* implies, shared leadership does involve sharing some decision making and other responsibilities, but it is not abdication, and it is quite different from simple delegation. Assuredly, there are certain routine tasks and responsibilities that a principal can and should delegate to experienced staff members, including classified staff—for example, responding to parents' concerns when the principal is temporarily unavailable or contacting specific district office departments for support with maintenance issues. But developing the depth of shared leadership necessary for transforming a school into a professional learning community does not happen overnight, and it is not completed in a few months.

A Balance for Growth: Direction and Support

Shared leadership is a developmental process that becomes more effective after two years than after one and continues to grow—along with student outcomes—the longer it is thoughtfully and intentionally fostered. Teachers grow as leaders as they incrementally learn new skills together in a safe environment encouraged by the principal and then apply these skills in their course-alike or grade-level team collaborations.

Recently, I had the delightful opportunity to reconnect with Carla Najera, principal of Natomas Middle School in Sacramento, California, which had implemented a cohort of school leadership teams several years ago. Since that time, she reported, shared leadership had continued to grow. The Natomas leadership team recently revised the form that collaborative teams used to guide their discussions and document their work as they analyze common assessments, discuss best practices, determine strategies that did or did not work, and plan for upcoming instruction. The teacher leaders initiated this change because they felt that the original form, which included considerable detail to guide teams' work when collaboration was new at the school, had become cumbersome given their present level of skill in collaborative tasks.

Principal Najera also related how Natomas Middle School's English team leaders approached her with a thoughtful proposal to implement students' use of Cornell Notes schoolwide. This initiative included extended work in planning and design, with the English teachers finally providing training to the rest of the staff—all with the full involvement and support of the principal. Najera has noted in her classroom walk-throughs that the strategy is consistently implemented by teachers. Long-time Natomas teacher leader Erik Jones said,

> [In many schools] teachers have these kinds of ideas often. How the idea is received by the administrator often dictates whether the idea dies before it can see fruition or is grown and developed into a possible dynamic component of a school.

Najera's approach is key to success in shared leadership: It demonstrates a delicate balance that enables her to provide needed direction while supporting teacher teams' creativity and initiative. Her stated and material support of the English teachers' proposals ensured full implementation by their colleagues in other departments, but she gave these teacher leaders the autonomy to use the expertise she perceived in them to develop the initiatives—always with her supportive guidance, questioning, and suggestions.

A Plan for Developing Teacher Leaders

Although there is no established sequence for developing teachers as leaders in a shared leadership school, an essential first step is to ensure that the leadership team has the right players. There is no need to eliminate or replace department chairs or other formal groups that have a sanctioned place in the school's culture. Some principals find that it works best to keep these groups in place while forming a new team for the specific purpose of developing shared leadership. Some teachers on the traditional leadership team may be members of the new team as well.

It may be helpful to give this new team a new name. In California's Beaumont Unified School District, the new teams were called the Instructional Leadership Council (ILC). Some ILC members continued to serve as department chairs at the secondary schools or grade-level chairs at the elementary schools. Others were new to any formal leadership role. Principals wanted to avoid the term *leadership team* because it had specific, historical connotations that were not necessarily consistent with the new roles.

Instructional Leadership Council members were selected by the principal—not voted in by their colleagues—to ensure that the members met important criteria, such as being open, having strong instructional skills, displaying a commitment to improving their schools, and having the respect of peers.

Principals who want to develop shared leadership in a professional learning community soon realize that sufficient time must be set aside within the school day on a regular basis (for example, weekly). However, a frequently missed point is that the teacher leaders of the collaborative teams also need regularly scheduled time to meet as a group with the principal to develop their leadership skills.

Given that leadership development is progressive and developmental, how does the training of teacher leaders play out in sequences and timelines? Obviously, development differs from site to site, but for a sample sequence, see "Outline: Training Sessions for Team Leaders" on p. 62.

In my experience, it is ideal for an entire district to begin moving into shared leadership, with teams from all the schools (with their principals) convening on a regular basis, such as bimonthly. That way, teacher leaders at all sites can develop strong skill sets for leading their peers, and principals throughout the district can begin to share leadership consistently.

However, a single school can also begin to implement shared leadership without a district-led professional development plan or structure. A principal may not be able to release the team for an entire day at a time, as a district might do with a cohort of teams. But meeting weekly or biweekly for shorter periods can provide

comparable support and learning, helping teacher leaders acquire a growing repertoire of skills. It simply requires a commitment to carving out the time to convene the group of teacher leaders and intentionally planning the learning agenda for each meeting so it isn't simply "another meeting." Over time, team members can begin to assist in planning and facilitating their own team learning.

Two resources I recommend to principals who are beginning this work are *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work, Second Edition* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010) and *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results* (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). Each team member should get his or her own copy of each book. One way to use the books is to have preassigned chapter readings followed by group discussions, but using real-time strategies when the group is together, like jigsaws or reading cascades, prevents feelings of having "homework" for the new role. Select chapters or portions of chapters intentionally on the basis of the teacher leaders' needs and the levels at which their individual teams are functioning.

Ownership, Not "Buy-In"

The rewards of seeing teachers develop as leaders are intensely satisfying. Shared leadership is a powerful path to school improvement because it generates ownership of schoolwide student outcomes.

This ownership is missing in many schools. Although teachers care about the success of their own students, even the most dedicated teacher may not feel the same level of concern about the rest of the students in the grade level, department, or school. The principal may be the only one feeling such responsibility—a heavy weight to carry alone—and so he or she may find it frustrating to attempt to get buy-in from teachers for improvement initiatives. Buy-in is a weak and relatively useless concept—nearly every staff includes teachers whose buy-in to past initiatives never amounted to more than lip service. In contrast, the process of building shared leadership creates *ownership*. Ownership thoroughly trumps buy-in.

So principals, embark on the adventure of developing shared leadership with your teachers. The need has never been more urgent, nor the opportunity more ripe. What we can accomplish together is far greater than what any of us can accomplish alone.

Outline: Training Sessions for Team Leaders

Here is a typical outline for a series of full-day training sessions for a cohort of school leadership teams. The timeline can vary, but over the course of the first year, the following topics can be addressed in five to six full-day sessions. (For a principal who is meeting his or her leadership team in shorter, more frequent sessions on-site, these topics can be broken into smaller segments.)

- Roles and responsibilities of team members (contrast with previous traditional leadership team roles and responsibilities).
- How to develop, implement, and stick to effective group norms.
- Effective meeting agendas.
- Practicing specific discussion protocols to use in collaborative team meetings (for example, protocols for discussing student work or for reviewing benchmark data).
- Troubleshooting and responding to resistance (this may be done in every session).

Cultural assessments (*Learning by Doing* by Rick DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Thomas Many has many downloadable tools).

Planning whole-staff professional development sessions.

In every session, participants add to their tool kit (a running list kept by each member of new skills, norms, protocols, celebration activities, focusing activities, role cards, and charts for group memory). Between sessions, team leaders apply their new skills as they lead collaborative meetings back at their sites. The next session begins with reporting successes and challenges arising from those meetings.

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Terry Wilhelm is the founder and owner of Educators 2000, whose website includes other resources related to shared leadership. She is a district-level consultant who works with educators nationwide.

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