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# Matters

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## The Impact of Conscious Leadership on Successful Schools

*The practices that leaders consciously or unconsciously choose can have far-reaching effects.*

Mark McBeth

We can all argue that strong leadership is vital to the overall success of our schools, but do we truly know what factors contribute to that success? Some may argue that instructional leadership is the key. In fact, research conclusively identifies instructional leadership as pivotally essential in influencing teachers' classroom practice, which in turn has a positive effect on student academic performance. Therefore, we cannot discount its importance. However, unconscious instructional leadership does not and will not equate to student success.

### What Is Unconscious Leadership?

What does unconscious leadership look like? An example could be found at Dodge City Middle School (DCMS) in Kansas, which until recently seemed to echo the town's infamous stamp of lawlessness. Much like the sheriffs of Dodge City's historical past, principals of the middle school came and went.

I stepped into this position with a different outlook, one of being an interim "turnaround principal" who was insistent on leading by conscious design. "If we can keep the students corralled with limited disruption for the day, it's a good day," a school leader told me shortly after my arrival. Under unconscious but well-intended management, the school's previous leaders:

- Limited instructional leadership practices to formal evaluations, in compliance with a negotiated agreement;
- Made decisions behind closed doors;
- Gave "school improvement" a dirty connotation by expending energy to incapacitate new teaching strategies;
- Had no method for analyzing leadership practices;
- Limited professional development to sporadic workshops for a few teachers;
- Limited schoolwide communication to managerial tasks and responsibilities;

- Shifted poor-performing teachers to other teaching assignments in hopes that a miracle would occur;
- Removed students with learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, or otherwise identified as at-risk from mainstream instruction; and
- Provided staff with a limited amount of time for collaboration, much of it absorbed by criticisms of teaching conditions and individual student behaviors.

Today DCMS is different. It has manifested a new collaborative culture in which decisions are shaped by a focus on meeting the needs of each child. There is now a consciousness among the staff of the impact of classroom and leadership practices on student achievement. Turning around the school took a conscious effort, with a leadership survey serving as a guide for timely shifts in leadership practices.

### The Leadership Impact Survey

The Leadership Impact Survey (McBeth, 2008) is a tool designed to amass qualitative data on leadership within a school. It identifies a school's leadership practices and their impact across 13 leadership and organizational factors, such as organizational culture, professional development, and communication.

Leithwood and his colleagues (2004) have identified a set of core leadership functions that constitute the basis of successful schools in almost all educational contexts. Each of these functions encompasses specific competencies, orientations, and considerations, giving purpose to routines of leadership practice:

- Setting direction;
- Human development; and
- Organizational development.

DCMS used this survey as a leadership practice formative tool, enabling leadership teams to have meaningful dialogue on the impact of their practices. Upon reviewing a practice, a conscious decision may be made to keep it, revise it, or throw it out and design a new and more impactful practice.

### What Is Conscious Instructional Leadership?

What does conscious instructional leadership look like? From a practice perspective, we would define instructional leadership as the routine interaction of leaders and followers within the context of specified instructional focuses. A conscious approach to leadership provides a common dimension of practice for teaching and learning.

Competent instructional leaders consciously focus on the precise strengths and weaknesses of each teacher's classroom practice. The leaders know the appropriate practices and how to use routines, tools, and structures to enhance teacher performance. They also have large repertoires of leadership practices they can use to deliver differentiated, instructional, and focused support to teachers. To measure the degree to which leaders addressed each of the three core functions, we used the Shaping of Leadership Function Form (McBeth, 2008), a tool directly aligned with the Leadership Impact Survey.

**Setting Direction.** As principal of DCMS, I consciously sold and sustained the school's collaboratively developed vision and mission by verbalizing them routinely within committee and team meetings. We used the vision and goals as a measuring rod when reviewing student achievement data and established high expectations through purposeful, structured interactions during staff meetings, team meetings, classroom observations, and brief reflective conversations.

**Human Development.** The school's coaching and support team, composed of administrators and instructional coaches, monitored instructional progress by engaging in learning walkthroughs, classroom mini-observations, and student work evaluations. Formative assessment data sources were shared and analyzed with staff every nine weeks. Teachers in need of assistance were identified for small-group and one-on-one interventions.

When school leaders engage in unconscious improvement efforts, they often focus on what teachers need to know. However, merely concentrating on teachers' knowledge acquisition is insufficient. Teachers need in-classroom support in order to build effective practices and reflective strategies.

Under conscious leadership, opportunities for professional development at DCMS were designed within the context of student engagement. Tools such as the Instructional Practice Inventory and walkthroughs were used to monitor the implementation of new practices. Teacher leaders were used early in the turnaround effort to provide immediate and sustained opportu-

nities for new practices, and direct classroom support was offered by modeling lessons and structured reflective dialogue.

**Organizational Development.** At DCMS we found it essential to consciously adapt and modify procedures, policies, and tools to improve instruction. We solicited collaborative input from staff and used tracking tools to measure our coaching and support efforts. As the year progressed and more schoolwide professional development was offered, the tracking tools began to reflect a correlation of training to teacher performance.

A bimonthly breakfast club engaged the staff in analyzing and designing new practices based on collaborative dialogue. Instructional and reflective practice tools were introduced at each session to guide discussions and to align mission, vision, and goals.

If we are serious about raising the level of student learning in our schools, we must lead by conscious design and with conscious intentions. By using tools such as the Leadership Impact Survey, instructional leaders can create conscious synergy between leadership and classroom practices.

**“Teachers need in-classroom support in order to build effective practices and reflective strategies.”**

### References

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**Mark McBeth** is the director of learning and leading at Keystone Learning Services, a consultant firm specializing in school-level leadership. His e-mail address is [lead2day@yahoo.com](mailto:lead2day@yahoo.com).