



Many Hands

Make Light Work

How collaborative leadership leads to collective efficacy

By Peter DeWitt

Leadership is not easy, nor is it for the faint of heart. In *Student-Centered Leadership* (2011), Viviane Robinson cites establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment as the most important aspects of instructional leadership.

It is very difficult for any leader to have a level of self-confidence in all of these areas. Collaborative leadership and collective efficacy are needed to help principals meet the ever-changing demands of the job.



REFLECT ON THIS

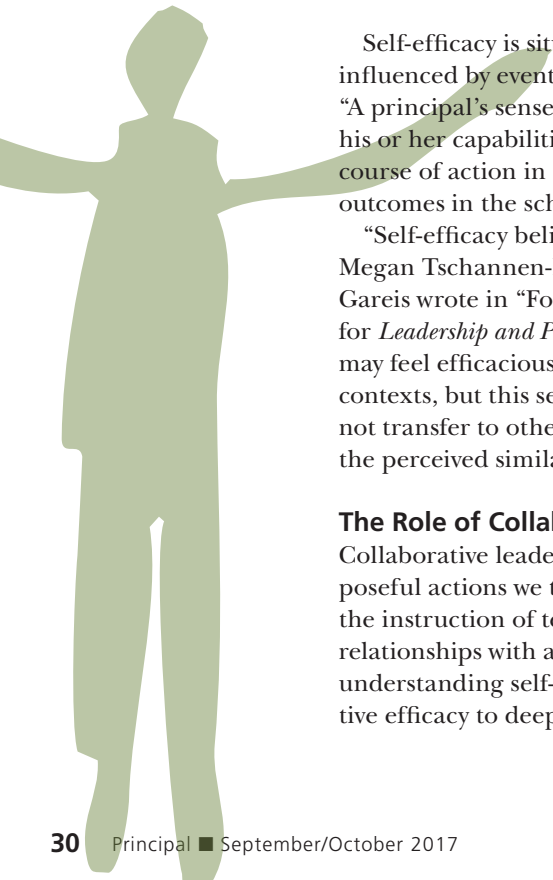
There are four major categories of experiences that influence self-efficacy:

1. Personal performance accomplishments
2. Vicarious experiences
3. Social persuasion
4. Physiological condition

There are also four areas that put our self-efficacy at risk:

1. Accountability and mandates
2. Budget cuts
3. School consolidations
4. Rapid growth

How will you overcome them?



“When faced with obstacles, setbacks, and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up, or settle for mediocre solutions,” psychologist Albert Bandura writes. “Those who have a strong belief in [their] capabilities redouble their effort to master the challenge.”

Having that level of confidence or belief in oneself is referred to as “self-efficacy.” Bandura defines it as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.” He identifies four major categories of experiences that influence self-efficacy:

1. Personal performance accomplishments—

A challenging activity brings out the strongest indicators for changing self-efficacy.

2. Vicarious experiences—

We can learn when we collaborate with others and witness the way they go about a challenging activity. Some of our best ideas come from colleagues we worked with during our teaching and leadership years.

3. Social persuasion—

Positive feedback helps increase a person’s level of self-efficacy.

4. Physiological condition—

Social and emotional well-being contribute to a person’s level of self-efficacy. It’s one of the reasons why Steven R. Covey told us to “sharpen the saw.”

Self-efficacy is situation-specific, and it is influenced by events around us. Bandura writes, “A principal’s sense of efficacy is a judgment of his or her capabilities to structure a particular course of action in order to produce desired outcomes in the school he or she leads.”

“Self-efficacy beliefs are context-specific,” Megan Tschannen-Moran and Christopher R. Gareis wrote in “Fostering Student Learning” for *Leadership and Policy in Schools*. “Principals may feel efficacious for leading in particular contexts, but this sense of efficacy may or may not transfer to other contexts, depending on the perceived similarities of the task.”

The Role of Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership includes the purposeful actions we take as leaders to enhance the instruction of teachers and build deep relationships with all stakeholders through understanding self-efficacy and building collective efficacy to deepen our learning together.

It is important for those in leadership positions to surround themselves with staff who can help them overcome the hurdles they face and find success in areas where they may lack confidence.

Collective efficacy, which involves collaborating with others, is another important piece of the collaborative leadership puzzle. Megan Tschannen-Moran and Marilyn Barr refer to collective efficacy as the “self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities.” Principals need to foster collective efficacy in schools because the combined effort among staff can have a positive impact on students. Collective efficacy is also needed to assist principals in situations where they do not feel efficacious.

In a 2008 study, Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education found that “school leaders’ collective efficacy was an important link between district conditions and both the conditions found in schools and their effects on student achievement. School leaders’ sense of collective efficacy also had a strong positive relationship with leadership practices found to be effective.”

It is important for those in leadership positions to surround themselves with staff who can help them overcome the hurdles they face and find success in areas where they may lack confidence. Unfortunately, too many leaders feel they should know all the answers because they are leaders and have to do many of their tasks alone. This attitude puts leaders into a losing situation because:

- Our challenges are too great to accomplish alone.
- Collective voices, including a well-rounded group of stakeholders, help us find best solutions.



Gone should be the days when leaders tell their teachers to collaborate together and then stand on the sidelines. Leaders need to jump into the collaboration.

When the leader's voice is the only voice, we end up enabling teachers to wait for the right answer instead of empowering them to help find the best answer together.

"The purpose of leadership is to facilitate group goal attainment by establishing and maintaining an environment favorable to group performance," Tschannen-Moran and Gareis write. That environment, or school climate, is at the heart of how successful leaders will be in the actions they take with others.

Collective efficacy and collaborative leadership are two essential ways of helping leaders foster a supportive and nurturing school climate in which students and staff feel they have a voice in learning. Over the last decade, due to increased mandates and accountability, too many school climates have fostered compliant behavior rather than bringing people together to collaborate. This has hampered collective efficacy, and it has certainly stripped away the self-efficacy of teachers, leaders, and students.

I believe it's time for leaders to let go of the reins and work with their staff to build collective efficacy. Gone should be the days when leaders tell their teachers to collaborate together and then stand on the sidelines. Leaders need to jump into the collaboration.

Why Collective Efficacy?

Principals who feel insecure in one area of leadership and strong in another may not understand that it is all wrapped up in the phenomenon of leadership self-efficacy. It is something they need

to learn in their leadership experiences, because too many flounder in the position and walk away without having taken the time to understand why and correct it.

At least four areas put our self-efficacy at risk, and collective efficacy can help us get through them:

- 1. Accountability and mandates**—Having test scores reported in the news and online affects a principal's self-efficacy. It is particularly defeating when the principal has tried to work with staff on maintaining a balance between test-taking and learning.
- 2. Budget cuts**—I was recently in a school district in the northeastern United States that was dealing with millions of dollars of budget cuts, and teachers were at risk of being laid off. Every news station reported on it in every news hour. Knowing that is coming, and that questions are being asked to which there may not be a definitive answer, has an impact on the self-efficacy of leadership, teachers, and students.
- 3. School consolidations**—When everyone is trying to find their new identity, it affects the self-efficacy of a principal as well as teachers, students, and parents. Unfortunately, that is exactly when a high level of self-efficacy is needed.
- 4. Rapid growth**—On the other side of the budget-cutting scenario are school districts that are growing rapidly, with new school buildings being built every year (yes, this

SLE PRESENT IN THE SCHOOL	SLE NOT PRESENT IN THE SCHOOL
Collective capacity of colleagues	Individual pursuits
Persist longer	Give up
Confidence in choice	Insecurity
Proactive	Reactive
Greater job satisfaction	Burnout
Motivating	Debilitating
Moral purpose	Lack of commitment

happens). In order to hire new staff and do the many other jobs that come with opening a building, leaders need to grapple with their self-efficacy to handle the job.


The table above provides examples of both positive and negative consequences of school leadership self-efficacy (SLE).

In the End

When I work with leaders, I'm always struck by those who feel they have to know it all. They seem to put undue pressure on themselves. When I was a new principal I did the same thing, and there were many sleepless nights and situations in which I felt a low sense of self-efficacy. Somewhere along the way I realized that the staff I worked with were my greatest resource, and we could come to better answers together than I could alone.

I came to the same realization when working with families. One of the first things I had to do as a principal was oversee the building of a new playground at our school. The community was small, and the school playground would be

well-used by the community because there were not a lot of other options. I knew nothing about building a playground, but many parents did. Over a year of planning and a few weekends of work, we built the playground together. One dad looked at me and said, "Many hands make light work." That is collective efficacy.

We need leaders who not only want to work in collaboration with students, staff, and families, but believe that working with others will lead to a better solution. I was fortunate to be part of a school community where I learned a great deal. Sometimes that learning came out of tough situations such as budget cuts and school consolidations. I could never have done it alone, and I'm thankful for the community I worked with. I believe more leaders would benefit from opening themselves up, stepping outside their comfort zones, and building collective efficacy among staff through collaborative leadership. 

Peter DeWitt is the author of several books, including *School Climate: Leading With Collective Efficacy* (Corwin Press/Ontario Principals Council, August 2017).