Distributed leadership requires the disposition of empowerment, not a position or title

*By Raymond McNulty*

The definition of leadership can be elusive. Traditional definitions that consider leadership the province of one person who is empowered to make decisions and tell others what to do are too limited. Seeing leadership instead as a set of beliefs and a sense of empowerment, however, will lead to a more useful concept: Leadership as a willingness to act and having the means necessary to do so.

Educational professionals should have the power to do what they need to do, not the power to control others. They should be empowered to make decisions that optimize learning, resources, and educational experiences. And this shift in power can extend to all levels of the school, from the student body to the community at large.

This is about distributing leadership—embedding it throughout the organization. When everyone is empowered to act, leadership can emerge in anyone, at any time or place. Sustained leadership demands empowerment. Empowered educators have the knowledge and beliefs to maintain the mission of the organization on its path of continuous improvement without specific direction from someone else.

**Leadership Density**

When I led the International Center for Leadership in Education, I coined the term “leadership density” to mean leadership that can be sourced from anywhere in the system, including individual teachers, staff members, parents, central office staff, students, principals, and others.

Research conducted by the British National College for School Leadership ([www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)) reports that its parallel term, “total leadership,” accounts for 27 percent of the variation in student achievement across schools. This is two to three times higher than is typically reported in studies of principals’ effect on performance.

Leadership density or total leadership includes six major components:

1. **Leadership always includes the potential to say yes.**

   Empowered people know that their ideas are valued. Too often, an individual will share an idea with colleagues or supervisors only to be met with discouragement. This is typical of institutions that are comfortable with the status quo, such as school boards, faculties, and parents who want guarantees that a new idea will work before trying it.

   One small-town school board had very clear ideas of what principals should do, for example. They believed that the principal’s job was to run the school, meaning primarily management. When the principal explained that a major function of the position was to nurture professional growth—especially among new...
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teachers—through coaching and support, the board was incredulous. What did that have to do with running the school?

Institutions often attempt to maintain stable routines by forging fixed, concrete definitions of roles and functions. Innovation dies quickly in these systems. Nobody wants to pour his or her thoughts, perceptions, and suggestions into an abyss. But when the potential for “yes” exists, colleagues and the larger organization will listen to what people have to say, consider it carefully, and include it in the conversation.

Schools have a process, policy, or protocol for most tasks, but it’s rare to find one with a protocol for approving innovative ideas. Consider developing a protocol to aid in the review, approval, assessment, and scaling of ideas that add value.

2. Leadership operates from truth. Truth in this context does not mean a larger philosophical or religious belief system. Truth is honesty—the courage to face and accept the current situation as a starting point. Effective leaders don’t act based on the world as they want it to be; they act on the world as it is, to move it closer to the way they want it to be.

The credibility of a leader is based upon speaking the truth, so resist grand statements such as “Things will never change” or “Everything will be fine,” because we live in a rapidly shifting environment. Speak with clarity but not certainty, understanding and admitting what you don’t know.

3. Leadership tolerates delayed gratification. The empowered can tolerate delays. Insecurity begets panic, shooting from the hip, and the feeling that all is lost if a situation does not change immediately. Those who are empowered know their ideas will be heard and have confidence that the situation will improve as a result of their efforts. Growth and change can be messy and slow—and that’s fine if the process is sound and people make informed decisions.

If success is delayed, “See, I told you it wouldn’t work” might be the response. Until a new idea is in operation, there is no way to know exactly how it will work. Inevitably, there will be a need for adjustment and fine-tuning along the way. Patience for, and nurturing of, innovation are necessary for ultimate success. How many ships were launched into space before one carried a human being? Even after the tragic loss of a space shuttle and everyone on board, the program continued. Failure is part of forward motion.

Be clear about the leading and lagging indicators of success in advance of launching a new project. Test scores are lagging indicators of success and require three or four years to clearly show results. Leading indicators such as student attendance, reduced discipline referrals, and grades can help show early progress and calm those wanting immediate feedback.

4. Leaders don’t proceed by making others wrong. Leadership is not a zero-sum game in which one idea succeeds at the expense of another. Effective leaders hear all voices and take the best from each to formulate action. The British study found “there is no loss of power and influence on the part of [principals] when the power and influence of many others in the school increase.”

Sharing power does not mean giving everything away; it means collaborating, working together, and honoring and respecting the perceptions and talents of others. Above all, it means realizing that together, we are more powerful than we are individually.

Sharing leadership also requires the ability to hold opposing ideas in one’s mind simultaneously. Roger Martin, dean of the School of Management at the University of Toronto, calls this “integrative” thinking or polarity management. Powerful leaders do not operate in either/or systems; instead, they operate from a position of both/and, as in continuity and change.

We often tend to make certain individuals containers for values we disfavor while stereotyping our own values positively. Examine what people are saying as they resist an idea—what are they afraid of losing? Both sides believe they speak the truth, but in the end, you will need each other.

5. Leadership demands the ability to remain peaceful in chaos. Peace in chaos is related to delayed gratification. Empowered leaders understand that proceeding to action with knowledge will yield better results than reacting in the moment. It’s the eye of the storm—a place from which to watch what’s happening unfold before decisive action.
US Airways Capt. Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger might have panicked when he realized that his plane was going down. But by remaining calm, assessing the situation in the few seconds he had, and acting deliberately, he landed the airplane on the Hudson River, saving everyone on board. That is peace in chaos—not only was Sullenberger empowered to make decisions, but he also had the necessary information, equipment, and confidence to do so with thoughtful intelligence. He was ready to take responsibility, and he acted.

Know that chaos is part of the norm. In the book Made to Stick, Chip and Dan Heath say that “no plan survives contact with the enemy.” You might make a plan, but it will be of little consequence unless the enemy behaves exactly as you expect.

6. Leadership requires personal, social, and emotional skills. Leaders can have all the technical skills in the world, but that knowledge won’t mean much if they don’t also know how to interact positively with others. Effective leaders never forget that students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders are people, regardless of their roles. People need acceptance and understanding. The most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible in their thinking within a system of core values—perseverance, resilience, and optimism.

To paraphrase Sun Tzu’s Art of War, the great warrior prepares for battle by finding ways to avoid it. The great warrior takes an enemy whole and does not destroy it, respecting life, property, and land. When leaders are empowered and therefore confident, they are not ashamed to show emotion, to care openly, and to take responsibility for the people around them. Anyone can give orders; not everyone has the compassion necessary to understand people, build trust and loyalty, and bring individuals together. Build bridges, not walls.

Good leaders have what author Daniel Goleman calls “emotional intelligence”—the self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation, compassion, and intuition necessary to understand others’ emotional states. They are balanced and understand their own biases. By carefully listening and responding to others, leaders can construct emotionally safe situations. Feeling safe supports empowerment; people who feel emotionally protected are more likely to take initiative and risks.

Developing these skills builds positive traits, including resilience, communication, motivation, and stress management, all of which establish a norm for everyone in the system. As a leader who empowers and distributes leadership, you must build a culture where there is understanding and tolerance for everyday challenges, failure, and chaos.

Implementation of Empowerment
Not everyone wants to be empowered. There will be those who look to the administration to solve problems. Often, the same people who don’t want the responsibility of empowerment will complain that they were not included in a decision. They will sometimes undermine the decision, then complain that the decision-makers have failed once again.

Then there are those who willingly take over the decision-making process. They want to control what happens to ensure they get what they want. Sometimes, they want the ear of the institutional leader so their needs are met, but they don’t have to take responsibility for the solution.

Most educators genuinely want to be part of the solution, however. These individuals will work collaboratively and put aside their egos for the greater good of the school and students. These people want and need the information and skills necessary for empowerment as they devote themselves to improving learning for all students.

What will entice everyone to get on board with empowerment and distributed leadership? Most people will be ready; others will need a little push. The most resistant will need to be part of small successes, building to greater and greater commitment. To paraphrase Shakespeare, some are born empowered, some become empowered, and some have empowerment thrust upon them.

Anticipate and avoid such barriers by developing a culture that brings people with you, taking every opportunity to explain what is being done and why, and demonstrating the key benefits of your actions.

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