

# Shared Leadership: Lessons Learned

How an evolving model for teacher leadership training has changed a school's culture.

Bonnie J. Cangelosi



In 2000, I took over the leadership of a large elementary school located in a small community in western Pinellas County, Florida. During my first year, the student population was around 950 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Today the school population is around 750 students, with 93 percent being white students who live in the surrounding community, and 6 percent black students and 1 percent Asian or Hispanic students bused from nearby communities. Currently, 42 percent of the students are from low-income families and 18 percent have disabilities. The staff includes 42 full-time instructional and 35 support positions.

Shortly after taking the position of principal, I began to work on a leadership development model to create teacher leaders who could positively impact the culture of my school. I knew that the change we needed should come from teachers in the classrooms, so I took time to research teacher leadership and found some interesting facts:

- The principal must be able to capitalize on teachers' professional skills by developing leadership opportunities in their areas of strength;
- It is imperative for teachers to stop working in isolation and step into leadership roles;
- Shared leadership is a critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance;
- With all of the demands facing school leaders, it is now more important than ever to build collaboration with teachers;
- The leader in an organization must



be courageous enough to share leadership, or change will not be possible; and

- Shared leadership is a master skill that enables teams to function effectively (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

### Developing a Leadership Model

With this research in mind, I introduced a leadership development model designed to create teacher leaders by increasing collaboration, reducing isolation, and creating willingness to change. I created the following definition of a teacher leader to help me keep my vision focused: *A teacher leader is one who exhibits a willingness to collaborate, promotes organizational vision in others, and has a desire to change for the betterment of the organization.*

The first teacher leadership development model in 2001 was quite different than the one we use today. It has gone through evolutionary changes as I learned what worked and what didn't work. Originally, only staff members who held a team or curriculum leadership position were included in a leadership team focused on improved communication and school operations. We met twice a month for one hour and before each meeting e-mails were sent to gather topics. After each meeting, the team leaders would go back to their teams and share the information.

During their team meetings, the team leaders would collect items of concern for discussion at the next leadership meeting. This created a two-way communication system that allowed all staff to have a voice in schoolwide issues. To further communication efforts, each

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team leader was given the responsibility of coming to me with concerns from their teammates at any time during the school day, rather than having to wait for the next scheduled meeting. I found this to be most helpful with miscommunication and rumor control.

### How the Model Evolved

During the second year, the team began to focus on the development of leaders rather than managers of information, and leadership training opportunities were offered throughout the year. The team still met biweekly and membership still was limited to team and curriculum leaders. In the third year, the leadership team name was changed to the CORE (Collaborating Objectively Resolving Enthusiastically) team, reflecting the change of focus to professional development, improved instruction, and schoolwide improvements. All staff members now were invited to attend.

In the fourth year, as CORE members began to actively display leadership qualities beyond their constituencies, I stopped to gather and examine the data that had helped me to make many of my decisions regarding the team. I found, for example, that data from the initial leadership team indicated that 90 percent of the teachers preferred to work alone in the classroom to prepare for the day rather than collaborate to develop leadership skills and work on school goals. The first two years of meeting minutes revealed more of a concern with sharing information than focusing on leadership for student success, and attendance data from these same two years revealed a drop in teacher participation in the leadership meetings by the spring of each year. This obviously demonstrated a need for a change in what I was doing, and it was at this time that I completely changed to the CORE model and invited all staff to begin leadership training.

The CORE team continues to evolve each year. Recently we have spent time on team-building, using John Maxwell's *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*. My

strategy for this training was to watch the training video or read a chapter, create one question to springboard conversation, and then sit back and listen. I have noticed over the years as an administrator that what I say seems to lead any discussion, so if I want real conversation from the teachers, I keep my mouth shut. What this approach has created is a staff not afraid to question and look for answers to an issue or problem. Teachers have learned that it is OK not to have all the answers and to help each other find solutions.

### What We Have Accomplished

We now have a team that impacts the culture of the whole school by focusing strictly on how to improve the school and classroom results. Information is shared in writing and through weekly e-mails from the principal. Results from an end-of-year survey indicate that 82 percent of the staff feel that their needs are being heard and that improvement efforts are strong. Our academic results have shown gains each year and the school has been given an A grade by the state.

I feel strongly that I now have a building of teacher leaders who have taken us way beyond what I could have accomplished by myself. Some of my teachers have chosen to move on to administrative careers and are doing exceptionally well. Others have decided to stay in their classrooms with children, but feel strongly about their leadership role in the school. Each year, as a team, we put processes and strategies in place to push our school improvement efforts and we are finding great results.

Reflecting back over the years, here are some lessons that I have learned:

***It wasn't easy to hand over responsibility and leadership to my teachers.*** Teachers were so used to being told what to do, and so afraid of making a mistake, that they did not step into leadership roles even if they possessed strong leadership skills.

***My CORE team proved to be a successful model.*** CORE provided the opportunity for teachers to receive leadership training and to be successful team members.

The structure of the CORE team built the foundation for teacher leadership, and this foundation has now grown into an everyday way of work.

***All our growth has focused on building culture and finding academic strategies that work.*** This has, in turn, resulted in increased student achievement at all grade levels.

***I attribute this success to the vision I had and shared with my staff.*** All of my actions and words were based on this vision, and keeping a clear focus on the vision helped my staff to understand why I made the choices and decisions that I did.

***I created an opportunity for teachers to step into leadership roles, and supported them in the decisions they made.*** I learned the value of keeping my mouth shut and listening to the intense professional conversations of my staff. These conversations led to more needed change than I could have ever hoped to achieve by myself. 

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### Reference

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2002). *The leadership challenge* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### WEB RESOURCES

John Maxwell shares insights into leadership and team building for current leaders in any organization.

[www.injoy.com](http://www.injoy.com)

Posted on this Web site is Chapter 8 from Diane Sweeney's book, *Learning Along the Way: Professional Development By and For Teachers*, which addresses both the fear and excitement associated with teacher leadership.

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