

SHARED LEADERSHIP

Strategies to build—and sustain—
a strong leadership team.



The challenges of the past year have magnified the importance of effective school leadership. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us one thing, it's that unprecedented times call for unprecedented leadership skills. When our capacity to lead is challenged and we struggle for answers, it is good to go back to our roots and reset our approach to strategic thinking. Shared and distributive leadership practices offer school leaders a range of strategies to handle even the most perplexing issues. Use this guide with your staff as a starting point for developing or improving your shared leadership strategy.



Set the Foundation

In 2004, The Wallace Foundation funded a meta-analysis, “How Leadership Influences Student Learning,” and it still holds its weight 17 years later, with decades of research on school leadership. The findings continue to serve as a foundational tool for schools and school districts. Three in particular point to where school leaders should be spending their time and energy:

- **Set the Direction:** Vision and mission still matter. In fact, setting your school’s direction might be the area where principals have the most impact. Following through, monitoring performance, and evaluating the success of initiatives are equally important. School leaders who are effective communicators can promote the shared responsibility needed to ensure organizational success.
- **Develop Capacity:** Schools leaders must constantly work to increase the professional capacity of all of their staff members. When they feel confident and competent, they naturally desire to collaborate with their colleagues to do what is best for children. Developing people is about balancing training, resources, and support while also providing consistent and meaningful feedback.
- **Redesign:** Change is a given and constant factor in education. The past year has shown us that our ability to respond to change is critical to the growth and success of our students. Strong schools with strong leadership anticipate change and plan for it. The school improvement process is iterative and dynamic. School leaders must constantly assess, re-assess, and redesign the focus and fidelity of their work.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1 Have your staff write down what they see as the main vision and mission of the school. Do these answers match? Discuss why or why not.

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6 Ways to Build Your Team

Research supports that what school leaders do matters—significantly. These six solid strategies can help you strengthen leaders in your building.

- 1. Grow (all of) your people.** Any chance to come to the table for a shared leadership meeting is a collaborative opportunity to move your collective vision and mission forward. Make sure you have the right people at the table: an equal and diverse representation—classroom teachers, special education teachers, and staff with a range of opinions. Without those voices at the table, decisions might be made that seem sustainable and effective in theory, yet they might never get off the ground. Why? There is a lack of teacher investment. The plan needs to be vetted, questioned, and refined by those who will be doing the work.
- 2. Get to know your people to build culture.** Adults have many of the same triggering emotions as children, and they need time to synthesize and move onto the work at hand. Fostering a positive culture with your leadership team can start with this simple example: Have your team pick an emoji that explains how they are feeling at the moment, and have them share it. The answers will vary. No matter the story, you have started the meeting off with some laughter, collegiality, and team building.
- 3. Challenge your people.** As the lead learner in your building, crafting an agenda for your shared leadership meetings should be thoughtful and stimulating to your team. The goal of shared leadership meetings is to collaborate, examine data, and make decisions that are actionable. The agenda should not look like a grocery list but rather a series of meaningful questions to allow team members to reflect as they prepare for the work ahead. Share the meeting agenda ahead of time, including these questions, to give your team time to dig into the data, reflect on what they see, jot notes on their findings, and come ready to problem-solve.
- 4. Follow up with your people.** The meeting is over, and now it is time for the real work to be done. How will the next steps take place? What is the timeline for completion? Who will be in charge of contacting that expert for professional development? Your meeting minutes should look like a mini-school improvement plan.
- 5. Walk with your people.** Lead learners spend a lot of time observing and interacting with teachers and consistently participating in collaborative planning sessions with teachers as they grow their collective efficacy. They are teammates, not overseers. They need to dig into the planning, content, and strategies so they can learn with their people. This will help the school leader develop an informed perspective on what is happening in classrooms.
- 6. Share the vision.** One responsibility of the leadership team can be to share the work that is being done to move the school forward in the spirit of full transparency. A strong leadership team can ensure that the entire staff and community are fully aware of the goals and objectives for the year. Collaborate and leverage relationships with staff and parents to work toward the same goals, and keep the focus and conversation on school improvement planning year-round through principal communication, newsletters, conferences, evening events that align, and assemblies that correlate.



