

# Weave a Web OF EXPERTISE





## There's strength in empowering the collective

BY JOHN HATTIE AND RAYMOND SMITH

**E**ducators are increasingly relying on teams as they discover that traditional methods of problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and implementation are not fast or flexible enough to respond to the challenges of the times. The issue? When things go wrong, many find it easier to “do it themselves,” defeating any value that derives from working in groups. And even when things go right, a sharp eye can often discover room for improvement.

Everyone in the school—teachers and school leaders alike—should be watchdogs over effective collaborative practice. Monitor the team’s effectiveness: How can the group make better use of its resources—time, money, processes, and people? Look for what’s missing, what’s getting in the way, and what needs to happen. Keep an eye on colleagues: Who needs encouragement, who’s out of line, who’s confused, who is using practices that discourage knowledge-sharing and information exchange, and who engages in practices that add to the group’s collective brain?

Armed with clearly articulated success criteria (i.e., complete descriptions of proficient collaborative practice), teachers and school leaders can give the group the feedback it needs at the times members need it the most to improve practice. And if group members still see behavior that’s hurting performance, they can have the courage to bring the problem to the rest of the team’s attention for corrective action.

One of the best ways to protect the team's results is to find problems of process quickly enough to be able to make just-in-time adjustments. Catch them when they are small—and fix them before they have a chance to metastasize or keep team members entrenched in old, unproductive behaviors. Even if everyone in your group is competent, committed, and hard-working, group members can't ignore internal problems and still succeed as a team.

### EMPOWERING THE COLLECTIVE

Today's schools are highly complex organizations. Effective school leaders must be able to leverage accountability and technology, implement performance-based evaluation systems, reengineer outdated management structures, recruit and cultivate nontraditional staff, drive decisions with data, build professional cultures, and ensure that every child achieves the identified behavioral and academic standards.

To accomplish these expectations, school leaders must make certain that everyone has easy access to the organization's expertise—its collective brain. Answers need to come from the best-informed people—typically those closest to the action. Everyone in the organization needs to be sufficiently linked so they know where they are

in relation to the organization's goals and what next steps to take themselves. A highly integrated system like this operates only when there is a tightly woven web of informed, coordinated effort.

How do school leaders pull this off? Not by being the “head honcho” or the one with all the answers; rather, by empowering everyone in the organization. Make it easy for everyone to connect with each other, resolve problems at their level, generate ideas, and make and learn from mistakes. Highly skilled school leaders activate and scale collaborative expertise by orchestrating opportunities for teachers and school leaders to come together, reflect, and act on their reflection in order to significantly impact the learning lives of those students entrusted to their care.

### THE 10 “MINDFRAMES” OF LEADERSHIP

Books written about school leadership often describe a number of traits, qualities, or skill sets you need to be successful. Ours instead makes an attempt to describe how successful school leaders *think* about the impact of what they do by tapping into the expertise of 10 world leaders and their unique, yet remarkably similar, perspectives on this most important topic. Its primary aim is to underscore the concept that school leaders must go beyond their behavior to look at the values that produce that behavior in order to make a significant impact on the learning lives of students.

School leaders who develop these ways of thinking—what we call “mindframes”—are more likely to have major impacts on student learning. The 10 mindframes are:

- 1. I am an evaluator of my impact on teacher and student learning.** This means evaluating what we (school leaders) are doing, observing what students and teachers are doing, and seeing learning through the eyes of students and teachers, as well as evaluating the effect of our actions on what teachers and students do and vice versa. The aim is for school leaders to use the evaluation of their impact to alter leadership practices on the fly while teachers' and school leaders' improvement efforts continue, with students and teachers at various stages of knowing and understanding.
- 2. I see assessment as informing my impact and next steps.** As mentioned previously, formative evaluation is one of the primary influences on student learning, and this makes the case for the school leader's learning as well. School leaders need feedback about their effects on each student and teacher; assessment is school leader feedback, school leaders are evaluators, and teacher colleagues and students are peers in the feedback equation. School leaders—like teachers and students—need to debate and agree about where they are going, how they are doing, and where they are going next. In so doing, all parties learn about implementation as it happens.

## The Feedback Loop

Mindframes depend on the solicitation and internalization of effective feedback, which has three hallmarks:

1. It tells you what was done well and what needs improvement, and offers specific “Where to next?” suggestions based upon success criteria;
2. It relates to the learning goal(s) that were shared and clarified with students and teachers at the outset of the learning cycle; and
3. It focuses on the product or task, the processes used, or the learner's self-regulation, not on the learner as a person.

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- 3. I collaborate with my peers and my teachers about my conceptions of progress and my impact.** This belief is supported by research performed in the 1970s by Albert Bandura, a psychologist at Stanford University who uncovered an interesting pattern in work group dynamics. He observed that a group's confidence in its abilities seemed to be correlated to its greater success. When a school team (faculty) shares the belief that through their combined ability they can overcome challenges and produce targeted results, they will be more effective.
- 4. I am a change agent and believe all teachers and students can improve.** School leaders' role is to change students and teachers from what they are to what they want them to be—what they want them to know and understand.
- 5. I strive for challenge rather than merely "doing my best."** In most cases, schooling is a complex endeavor filled with challenges—and school leaders must embrace this endeavor and make those challenges what they want them to be. The art of teaching and leading involves recognizing that what is challenging to one student or one teacher might not be challenging to another, so paying constant attention to individual differences while seeking commonalities is necessary to ensure that peers can work together to make the difference.
- 6. I give and help students and teachers understand feedback, and I interpret and act on the feedback given to me.** Examining what is working and what isn't (e.g., effective feedback) and acting on the results of that examination to improve practices is the only way for stakeholders to reduce the discrepancies between a school's current status and its goals. Provide feedback, seek out information about one's performance, and interpret and act on the information to improve one's practice.
- 7. I engage as much in dialogue as in monologue.** Teachers talk up to 80 percent of class time. But while there is a need for teachers and school leaders to impart information, there is also a need for teachers and school leaders to listen to students and teachers. Dialogue offers free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues—a "deep listening" that exposes participants' views, beliefs, and assumptions. Highly effective school leaders understand the value of creating an organization where there is a balance between imparting information (monologue) and dialogue.
- 8. I explicitly inform teachers and students what successful impact looks like from the outset.** For adolescent as well as adult learners, it is helpful to know when they have reached a learning goal and the success criteria behind that.

**9. I build relationships and trust so that learning can occur in a place where it is safe to make mistakes and learn from others.** The practice of school leadership can be impactful or of little consequence based on the quality of relationships among students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. An atmosphere of trust and confidence, safety, care, and goodwill are essential for education in general, and student/teacher achievement in particular. Teaching and learning is a process that is performed together, and both sides need one another.

**10. I focus on learning and the language of learning.** Prior knowledge and the mental processes learners use to understand information shape the unique ways in which individuals learn. Effective school leaders and their teacher colleagues recognize the uniqueness of each student's learning situation and that student thinking and learning develop over time. They set up learning environments that address students' unique needs in order to help everyone achieve beyond what they might have predicted.

Do you recognize your leadership in these mindframes? Practice these steps toward collaboration, and you'll be able to better assess and direct the impact you'll make. ●

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