

TEN STEPS TEACHERS CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE THEIR LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND OUR SCHOOLS

Leadership density sits at the core of organizational effectiveness and school reform. Principals, educational consultants, authors, and trainers can help teachers with instructional strategies, curriculum alignment, classroom management, lesson planning, and numerous other aspects of teaching. If, however, they fail to help develop leadership abilities among the staff, educational initiatives will have a poor chance of being implemented effectively or will not be sustained. Michael Fullan goes further:

There is no chance that large-scale reform will happen, let alone stick, unless capacity building is a central component of the strategy for improvement. (Leadership and Sustainability, 2005)

Everyone has leadership potential and the most effective principals and superintendents establish the conditions for that potential to be revealed. At the same time, development of one's leadership abilities cannot rely on the will of our "titled" leaders. Leadership is revealed through action and therefore must be practiced. While this book and other manuals for leadership can help guide the teacher intent on growing his or her capacity, one can only grow in leadership by acting like a leader.

In this book we have also tried to demystify leadership. Leadership is not only about making major decisions, it is also about the small, purposeful acts that improve the organization or that help others grow. It is about becoming more aware of one's strengths and weaknesses (Level I); about understanding the perspective of others and helping others make sense of new information (Level II); it is about inspiring others and helping others grow (Level III); and it is about participating in a common cause and acting with integrity (Level IV).

One does not have to have a title to be a leader, nor does he have to take the lead on some project or initiative. Indeed, the most effective organizations are the ones in which the majority of the staff carry out small, but purposeful acts of leadership in multiple ways. Every teacher can take immediate steps to improve their leadership capacity, to practice the art of leadership. We outline below ten actions one can take immediately to continue your leadership journey. These actions do not require a lot of time or resources to undertake. All they require is a little initiative and the will to act like a leader.

Ten Steps

1) ***Seek peer feedback.*** One of the ways to do this is to create a buddy group or circle of friends. Ask two or three of your colleagues to commit to observing each group member teach (or work with students) once a month. Then hold a monthly meeting at a coffee shop to provide each other constructive feedback. Use a rubric or template to help keep the feedback focused on what the profession values most instructionally. This action will help you assess your strengths and areas for growth in an informal setting. It will help develop self-awareness, which is a key aspect of Level One leadership.

2) ***Assess your current leadership capacity and establish a leadership growth goal.*** Use the leadership rubric provided in Chapter Three of this book to conduct a self-assessment. Be as honest and assess yourself as accurately as possible. Once you have conducted the self-assessment, create a specific goal to improve in at least one area of the rubric. This act of self-assessment and goal setting also helps one develop Level One leadership.

3) ***Practice gaining perspective or demonstrating a sense of perspective at a staff meeting.*** At your next staff meeting, make a comment or ask a question using the words “point of view” or “perspective” in your remarks. Consider using any of the following examples:

“I agree with your *perspective* on the need for _____, and I would add . . .”

“The notion that _____ is an understandable *point of view*. I wonder . . .”

“You provide an important *perspective*. Perhaps we should also consider . . .”

If you are not used to speaking up in meetings, this leadership act may seem somewhat contrived at first. Still, conducting this leadership action will not only force you to listen for the perspective of others, it will also demonstrate to others that you are actively listening and trying to gain understanding.

4) ***Job shadow an administrator.*** Usually teachers shadow an administrator only if they plan to be in administration. Level Two leadership, however, requires everyone to understand the goals and priorities of the organization and the decision-making structure. In other words, you will be a better teacher and a stronger teacher leader if you understand the larger picture of the organization.

Find an assistant principal, principal, or central office administrator who would be willing to let you shadow them for a day. Job shadow the administrator, taking note of decisions made, major areas of focus, and topics of conversations with other people. At the end of the day, debrief with the administrator to gain greater understanding of the decisions made and the type of activities in which the administrator engaged.

Afterwards, and on your own, reflect upon these three questions:

- What decisions would you have made differently and why?
- Which leadership skills and actions (from the leadership framework) were exhibited by the administrator?
- Which leadership skills and actions were demonstrated by the staff members during the day?

5) ***Teach your colleagues.*** The leader continues to learn and also contributes to the knowledge of others. Find a current area of interest that also impacts a reform initiative or an improvement area for your school or district. Work with your building leadership to find an opportunity to teach a handful of staff members or present to the entire staff.

If you are not used to presenting to or teaching peers, you might start off this aspect of leadership by co-teaching or co-presenting. The important point to remember is that once you get beyond Level One leadership, leadership behavior begins to shift from a focus on one's own ability to that of the larger group.

6) ***Make a habit of complimenting others on a valued behavior.*** Leaders motivate. One does not have to be a motivational speaker in order to inspire. More often than not, it is the small, but sincere compliment or pat on the back that inspires people to do their best work. Make a habit of extending a compliment to a colleague, subordinate, or supervisor regarding a positive behavior that you observed. The behaviors you want to compliment as a leader are the ones valued by the organization to meet the goals or objectives of the organization.

7) ***Help someone make sense of a policy or practice.*** Leaders not only communicate, but they also help make sense of new information (see page ____). This should become a habit to be evoked whenever there is some anxiety around change or new information. Seek out opportunities to do sense-making. When such an opportunity arises, practice asking yourself and processing with others the following:

- Are you getting accurate information or only part of the picture?
- Do you understand the information? What is the context?

- What clarification or additional information do you still need to make an informed judgment?
- Whose perspective and what interests should you consider while formulating your own reaction and before relaying the information as presented?
- In what ways can you explain the rationale for the change, action, requirement, etc.?
- How might you build perspective – an appreciation for the bigger picture or the interests of other individuals, groups, or organizations?

Making sense of information does not mean that you have to agree with the plan, policy, requirement, or decision. It is incumbent upon every leader at every level to seek understanding and to appreciate various perspectives before making a judgment. Being purposeful about sense-making will help expand your Level Three leadership.

8) ***Mentor an inexperienced or struggling teacher.*** Volunteer to help a new teacher or a colleague who wants to grow in the profession. This mentoring can be done formally or informally. Most schools have an official mentoring program for new teachers or teachers on improvement plans. Ask your building leaders about becoming an official mentor.

Regardless of the availability of official mentoring positions, one can always offer support to another colleague. Providing support to a colleague can be done in a number of innocuous ways. Consider the following examples:

- Designing and sharing a lesson plan
- Modeling a lesson or instructional strategy
- Asking a teacher to join you in a book study
- Recommending a particularly useful resource
- Sharing classroom management procedures
- Offering to coteach a lesson with another teacher
- Designing a scoring rubric with others

Mentoring or providing support for others is part of Level Three leadership. This leadership activity helps develop your coaching abilities. One has to practice being a coach to become an even stronger leader.

9) ***Offer a solution to a problem.*** Take a school-wide issue or concern, and suggest a solution to the problem. This action will require you to research the issue, investigate various perspectives, consider different interests, benefits, and costs, and use a

problem-solving approach – all good practices for a leader. The Level Three leader uses a problem solving approach when faced with a challenge.

One of the organizational challenges schools and departments face is the self-imposed limits to problem solving that many teachers set. Teachers sometimes sit back and watch the titled leaders come up with the answers, allowing themselves to be led instead of exercising leadership themselves. While some supervisors may feel that even the proffering of a suggestion is somehow overstepping bounds, most are more receptive to solutions presented in a professional way. In any case, it is the responsibility of the teacher leader to provide input and become part of solving the key concerns of the school or organization.

10) ***Help develop a picture of what success looks like.*** Leaders help staff members move toward a shared vision. Again, one doesn't have to be the principal or district leader in order to develop that shared vision and to help people aspire to it. At a practical level, helping to accomplish a larger vision usually means translating that vision into specific actions that describe what success or excellence looks like. Take an opportunity to help others develop a picture of excellence or a picture of what success looks like. This leadership act also can be accomplished in multiple ways. For example:

- Take one objective or criterion from the teacher evaluation instrument and help design a rubric that describes that objective in specific, observable behaviors.
- Take a teacher skill such as student-teacher engagement and develop a training DVD that shows what great engagement looks like.
- Conduct action research to identify best practices with regard to a school reform initiative.
- Initiate a distinguished teacher certification program in your school or district.
- Organize a leadership academy for teachers to help others learn what leadership looks like at the teacher level.