

BUILDING CAPACITY FROM WITHIN:
CHANGING THE ADULT WORKING ENVIRONMENT
IN OUR SCHOOLS

In M.J. Elias, H. Arnold, and C. Steiger Hussey (Eds.),
EQ + IQ = Best Practices for Caring and Successful Schools,
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

Corwin Press, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

Main telephone at Corwin: 805-499-9734
Fax: 805-499-5323

Building Capacity from Within: Changing the Adult Working Environment in Our Schools

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To exercise leadership today, leaders must institutionalize their leadership... They must create or strengthen systems that survive them," – John W. Gardner, 1995

Introduction

Strengthening the American school system has been the focus of a frenzy of national reform activity in recent years. School reform legislation now occupies a prominent position in the national spotlight, with the passage of such items as *Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994* (Short & Talley, 1997). Forces such as the demands of the information age, the increasingly competitive global economy, and changing demographics of the U.S. population are propelling fundamental changes in American schools (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). These changes have led to strong and persistent criticisms of education in this country in recent years (Trimble & Miller, 1996).

The present article provides school leaders with practical, specific exercises designed to strengthen and improve educational systems. Readers are offered detailed descriptions of activities School Leadership Teams have found useful in transforming an often mundane ritual, the faculty meeting, into a time of "reunion and renewal" for staff. Concrete examples are given which illustrate how teams have used these activities in their own schools to increase cooperation and collegiality among faculty, improve school climate and staff morale, and develop and institutionalize healthy practices. With increasing demands for improved school leadership, guidelines like these have never been more valuable, relevant, and timely.

Background

Responding to a variety of criticisms of the modern American school system, educational reformers have adopted the "clarion cry" of improved leadership for our schools (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). School leaders are "being urged to step forward to assume this mantle as well as the more proactive role it entails. They are being asked to undergo a metamorphosis" (81). Administrators who were trained to be managers are now expected to be leaders, with such responsibilities as creating shared visions, developing collaborative decision-making processes, enabling teacher success, fostering collaborative team relationships, and promoting teacher development (Neufeld, 1997). Strong collaborative skills have replaced strong bureaucratic skills as important qualities needed for effective school leaders (Payzant & Gardner, 1994). These changes have dramatically highlighted the importance of participatory leadership and administrators' interpersonal skills as they promote staff ownership of change and create an effective internal support structure (Murphy & Hallinger 1992).

These demands for change in administrative roles and functions have not come solely from reformers and researchers. Practicing administrators themselves have repeatedly noted personal needs to develop a new set of knowledge and skills essential for effectiveness as leaders in education today. Goddard (1997) surveyed 193 principals in Nova Scotia regarding their priorities for professional development and training opportunities. The most frequent responses included requests for techniques for increasing positive community involvement, techniques for improving staff relations, and strategies for building school culture and climate (9).

Similarly, Neufeld (1997) examined the perceptions of 23 urban middle school principals regarding their needs for professional development and training. These administrators spoke specifically about needing additional knowledge and skills around the meaning and practice of leadership and the creation of a positive school culture. For example, they understood the importance of engaging teachers and others in creating a shared vision for their schools, but did not know how to accomplish this task. They acknowledged a responsibility for facilitating goal setting, problem solving, and team building, but were lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively address these issues. Varner (1998) describes the frustration that teachers experience when their principal is not knowledgeable about their needs. She suggests that principals must learn how to lead people through change and learn how to run highly efficient and effective meetings that get all the issues on the table.

Administrators, researchers, and reformers are increasingly recognizing the critical need for school leaders to “create and strengthen systems that survive them.” One strategic method for addressing this need, which has emerged as a common theme throughout the research, is the development of effective school management teams. The creation and maintenance of collaborative, competent teams of administrators, faculty, and parents contributes to a positive school climate and culture, and to the development of a shared vision for schools. In addition, “creating and sustaining effective [management] teams may provide an answer to the shortcomings of large schools and the isolation of teachers and students” (Trimble & Miller, 1996, 36). According to Lambert (1998), “if we are to sustain our improvements and build on the strength and commitment of educators, we need to address the capacity of schools to lead themselves” (17). For the past 10 years, the Princeton Center for Leadership Training has been building the capacity of schools and school personnel to develop and maintain effective school management teams, also referred to as School Leadership Teams or Action Teams.

At the Princeton Center, we believe that building a strong foundation of healthy relationships among faculty, administrators, and parents is at the core of school reform. If this element is missing, it can disrupt or even prevent a school from instituting necessary changes. Creating a healthy social and emotional working environment for teachers must become a top priority before they can institute significant improvements in their students’ learning environment.

What Constitutes a Healthy Working Environment?

Members of a school's faculty constitute a group; they are a collection of individuals sharing certain common circumstances. Like all groups, faculty will progress through a set of developmental stages -- forming, norming, storming, and performing. Schools that pay attention to these stages and establish rituals and other healthy practices on an ongoing basis, reap the benefits of high teacher morale; cooperative and collegial professionals with a shared passion for teaching and learning; and a climate that supports risk-taking and "reflective" conversation. One practical way to introduce these healthy practices, and to give school personnel time to experience and reflect on these practices, is by redesigning faculty meetings. Most schools hold faculty meetings for at least one hour each month, yet few value these sessions or use them to promote more positive working relationships among faculty and administrators.

School Leadership Teams can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to lead their faculty through a process of "reunion and renewal." Using the four group stages as a guide, faculty meetings can be restructured to introduce new practices, with time for small group exchange, debate, dialogue, and reflection.

Forming

Most veteran staff remember what it was like when they first joined the faculty of their school. An exercise entitled **Reviewing our History: Then and Now** gives staff an opportunity to collectively share significant events and turning points throughout the school's history -- usually from the 1960's to the present. A timeline is placed on one wall of the room and teams of teachers and administrators place their initials on the year that they first began working in the school, along with a descriptive phrase that depicts their first impressions of their school. Then, anywhere along the continuum that significant events occurred, staff describe what happened (and when) that affected the climate of the school. Next, beginning with the most veteran member of the school, a story unfolds about each member's experiences, building on the central themes that become apparent as the collective history is shared. Following this exercise, staff have an opportunity to step back and reflect on how people's relationships were formed and how events have affected those relationships over time. Historical patterns emerge that continue to affect the climate and culture of the school, and faculty can take notice and agree to let go of destructive forces from the past while building on strengths and reinforcing positive events.

One such example was the realization from staff in an urban middle school that they were still mourning the loss of two students and a faculty member who were killed in separate accidents more than 10 years ago. These traumatic events, all occurring within several years of each other, rocked the foundation of the school, and the faculty had never recovered. The faculty had become cautious and distrustful and unwilling to invest in collaborative professional endeavors. **Reviewing Our History** was a much needed wake-up call for the faculty, and resulted in a cathartic grieving and letting-go process followed by a re-emergence of commitment and passion for teaching.

Norming

Faculty meetings can also be a place to review a set of internal norms and staff practices that affect the way people get along and work together. One exercise that can help faculty assess their school's culture and climate is called **How Are We Doing?** Interdisciplinary teams of faculty identify three practices that they value and appreciate and three practices that need work. (See figure 1) Teams collect examples of how each practice is played out and the effect it has on the working environment. Teams report their findings to the entire faculty and, collectively, the practices that need the most work are identified. Teams then brainstorm ways that new rituals can be introduced to address the areas that need work. For example, a faculty in one large high school noted that the way they began each day felt isolating and unfriendly -- both for staff and students. By introducing a new ritual, piped-in soft classical music throughout the school for the first five minutes of the day, everyone felt more relaxed and connected to one another.

Figure 1

How Are We Doing?
An Assessment of Our School's Norms and Healthy Practices

Directions: Consider the following internal norms and healthy practices for staff. Identify three areas of strength and three that need work.

- The way we communicate
- The way people treat each other
- The way we begin each day
- The way we end each day
- The way conflicts or problems are handled
- The way staff is assigned to tasks
- The way decisions are made
- Work standards
- Attendance
- Planning time
- Faculty meetings
- Faculty inservice
- Professional development opportunities
- Others: _____

Storming

In many schools, faculty and administrators get stuck around "Storming" issues, holding on to grievances, insults, and disappointments for months and even years. Imagine a school climate that supports the belief "we agree to disagree;" a climate that fosters sharing diverse perspectives on teaching and learning; and an atmosphere that supports opportunities for colleagues to give and receive constructive feedback. Faculty meetings are an excellent place to hold periodic "straight talk" sessions, a practice that can address storming issues directly and, in many cases, prevent long-term storming

conflicts from escalating and becoming a destructive force within the faculty. **Straight Talk** involves identifying one to five colleagues who agree to provide each other with feedback. First, each person writes down all of the things that he/she appreciates about each member participating in this process. Then he/she identifies (1) what is getting in the way of their working relationship and (2) what he/she needs from the other person to strengthen their professional bond. With **Straight Talk** forms completed (see figure 2), one member of the group receives feedback from each person, in turn, without any interruptions, except asking for clarification if needed.

Figure 2

Straight Talk with Colleagues				
	Name of person receiving feedback	What I appreciate	What gets in the way	What I need from you
Person #1				
Person #2				
Person #3				
Person #4				

Following the receipt of feedback from all members of the group, the feedback recipient summarizes what he/she heard others say and thanks group members for sharing. At no time do members of feedback teams explain their behavior or get into conversations about what they heard. By practicing **Straight Talk** on a regular basis in a structured setting, staff members learn, firsthand, the effect they have on others and can modify behavior and attitudes, should they want to respond to constructive feedback. When members of a staff become more adept at giving and receiving this kind of feedback, it begins to occur more frequently as a matter of course in day-to-day operations of the school. In some cases, faculty may want to expand this process to include participating in a more comprehensive 360° feedback exercise that assesses colleagues in the areas of job knowledge, planning and organization, initiative and resourcefulness, professionalism, dependability, teamwork, and communication.

Performing

Schools are in the business of performing; unfortunately, school personnel are being asked more and more to perform new tasks in record time with limited resources. On top of this, we have now added the expectation that faculty and administrators will collaborate on everything from designing a new curriculum to restructuring the way they use time, space, and resources in schools. It is not surprising that frustration is high when the people involved in shared decision-making lack the tools to plan and communicate effectively in teams. One way to illustrate “what can go wrong” with school team efforts is the exercise **Blindfold Adventure**. The task is simple: everyone (up to 20-30 people on a team) is blindfolded and cannot speak while forming a straight line in reverse-alphabetical order by first names. The scene is predictable: some people stand frozen,

waiting to be rescued. Others latch on to anyone and get into some semblance of a line--not caring what the order looks like. A few brave souls may try to organize the group by attempting to create a system of communicating; i.e., drawing the first letter of their names on the hands or backs of participants. This activity gives people an opportunity to create order from chaos, although the many obstacles placed in their way make their goal difficult to achieve. The learning comes when the blindfolds are removed and a discussion ensues:

- How would you describe the way this group worked together to accomplish its task?
- What are some of the obstacles that got in the way; how were these obstacles similar/different from those we face in collaborative, decision-making efforts at school?
- What kinds of leadership emerged during this exercise; what was missing?
- What have we learned from this experience about the essential ingredients needed to work effectively on teams?

Obstacles/Issues in Implementation

The thought of attempting large-scale facilitation of faculty meetings may seem intimidating to members of School Leadership Teams. They may hesitate to take a more active role in school change for fear of obstacles such as resistance or protests from colleagues. For example, teachers may complain that faculty meetings are irrelevant and boring while simultaneously finding the traditional principal-led model familiar and comfortable. Disrupting the status quo and introducing a more interactive dynamic quality into this laid-back setting can be unnerving for some teachers. Some faculty may resist the need to step back and “form”—taking time out to get to know teachers with whom they have worked for many years. However, the chance to discuss their values and to share their personal and professional experiences during team-building activities can be enlightening and eye-opening for veteran teachers as well as new teachers on the block.

The most difficult group stage to tackle is, of course, “storming.” When should we introduce storming issues? How do we give staff permission to “vent” constructively? What strategies should we use to encourage the active participation of all faculty? These and other issues require careful planning and time for team members to practice using any activity that they want to introduce to their colleagues.

Teachers who lead this new process are often concerned about the reactions of their colleagues; however, the implementation of one successful meeting usually allays their fears. Developing a written evaluation form that asks teachers to rate the value of activities and to recommend ways to improve faculty meetings in the future gives teachers a voice and empowers them. Furthermore, the team that facilitated the meeting gets direct feedback on what worked and what needs to be modified. An example of comments after one school changed the format of their faculty meetings included:

- It helped us to reexamine the strengths and weaknesses of ourselves and staff as a whole.
- It was a good experience. It gave us some tools to (make) positive change.
- We have created a synergy to make (our school) successful.

The effective use of the practices described in this article requires knowledge and skills in a variety of critical areas. Members of School Leadership Teams would benefit from training in domains such as: (1) group stage theory development; (2) the art of group facilitation—skills and traps; (3) how to assess culture and climate of the school; (4) creation of a shared vision; (5) handling teacher resistance and learning how to anticipate and respond to other problems that come up. Such training will help them to be more confident and competent in their roles as school leaders.

Conclusion

If leaders in education are to respond effectively to increasing demands to strengthen the school system, we must recognize the potential for improvement that already exists within the school structure. We can “strengthen systems that survive [us]” by introducing and developing healthy practices that address the needs of faculty in a naturally occurring forum -- the faculty meeting. We can transform the climate and culture of our schools by changing an often mundane, unproductive ritual into an opportunity for collaboration, team-building, support, reflection, and growth.

By attending to the stages of group development with practices such as those described here, School Leadership Teams can turn faculty meetings into a time for teachers and administrators to exchange ideas, review strengths and areas that need work in their professional working environment, and experience firsthand how to solve challenging problems in a collaborative spirit. With these changes, educators’ roles and functions will change. “As roles change, relationships change. People see each other in a new light. They recognize new skills and resources in people they have known for years” (Lambert, 1998, 20). These changes begin the process of reunion and renewal within the adult working environment of the school. There is no better way to significantly impact the learning environment for students than to do just that, building the capacity from within.

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