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Can Instructional Leaders Be Facilitative

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When the concept of instructional leadership emerged in the early 1980s, the rules changed for school administrators. Long judged by their ability to manage school operations with businesslike efficiency, principals were now charged with a specifically academic mission. Study after study seemed to show that high-achieving schools had principals who boldly led the academic program, set goals, examined curriculum, evaluated teachers, and assessed results.

Many administrators welcomed the new emphasis because it supported their direct involvement in the heart of the school's mission--academics. But it also crystallized a particular image of leadership, one emphasizing top-down decision-making by a strong, technically adept leader.

Today, prevailing views of leadership suggest that the principal's role should not be to direct others but to create a school culture in which decisions are made collaboratively. Such "facilitative" leadership exercises power through others, not over them (David Conley and Paul Goldman 1994).

Facilitative leadership seems to challenge the assumptions of technical mastery and forceful decision-making associated with instructional leadership. How real is this apparent split? Can instructional leaders be facilitative leaders?

CAN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION COEXIST?

James Weber (1989) identified five main functions of instructional leadership: defining school mission, promoting a positive learning climate, observing and giving feedback to teachers, managing curriculum and instruction, and assessing the instructional program. Whereas earlier discussions of instructional leadership had placed these responsibilities squarely in the lap of the principal, Weber suggested that leading a group of professionals might call for a more collaborative approach--an idea that has continued to gain support.

This new direction, which emphasizes organizational culture rather than technical tasks, creates a dilemma for school leaders. On the one hand, collaborative approaches hold the promise of ultimately transforming teaching and learning. On the other hand, principals face daily demands for quick action on a host of issues: goals must be established, textbooks must be chosen, programs must be evaluated. Seemingly, they

must choose between long- and short-term payoffs.

Karen Prager (1993) argues that this is a false dichotomy, and that "the optimal solution would support collegial, empowering processes aimed toward specific instructional goals." She notes that while instructional excellence is most likely to be achieved through faculty ownership, collegiality does not automatically lead to improved student learning. School leaders must be able to translate the ambiguities of collaboration into the clarity of tangible goals.

As yet, the literature has not provided comprehensive models that smoothly integrate facilitative processes with instructional tasks. But recent work indicates that the tasks of instructional leadership are being approached in more collaborative ways.

HOW DO FACILITATIVE LEADERS DEFINE A SCHOOL'S MISSION?

Early descriptions of instructional leadership emphasized the importance of "setting high expectations," which normally meant establishing academic goals and raising test scores. This idea has since evolved into a more comprehensive concept, "establishing the school's mission," or "creating a vision."
School mission has sometimes been viewed as the personal creation of the principal, who is expected to articulate it, publicize it, and promote it, but recent discussions have emphasized the collaborative dimensions of the process.

At a minimum, major stakeholders (teachers, parents, community, students) should be invited to participate in formulating the mission (Joseph Rogus 1990). Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) argues that schools should be "purposeful communities," in which firmly held core values "permeate every aspect of the school organization." Teachers in such schools don't need a committee to tell them what the mission is.

Achieving such strong consensus requires a deft touch. Conley and Goldman note that school leaders often have to let go of their personal visions to achieve a larger consensus. At the same time, Nancy Buell (1992) argues that principals must actively intervene with those whose values are "out of alignment" with the common vision. This implies that formulating a vision is more of a continuing dialogue than a one-time event.

HOW DO FACILITATIVE LEADERS PROMOTE A POSITIVE LEARNING

CLIMATE?Learning climate is a concept that is easy to recognize but difficult to define. Some definitions emphasize "setting high expectations" while others highlight "friendliness" or "organizational personality." All seem to agree, however, that the

principal is the key.

Discussions of climate have often focused on individual administrator initiatives: minimizing outside intrusions into classroom time, roaming the hallways to greet students personally, dispensing rewards for achievement. The move toward collaboration reveals a much more complex process.

Sergiovanni, whose concept of "community" encompasses most of the dimensions of climate, identifies relationships as the linchpin. In a true school community, relationships are based on shared values rather than bureaucratic roles, resulting in "individuals who care, listen, understand, respect others and are honest, open and sensitive." He concedes that principals may need to begin by using bureaucratic authority but must ultimately build relationships based on professional and moral authority.

HOW DO FACILITATIVE LEADERS PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO TEACHERS?

One of the most visible ways principals demonstrate instructional leadership is by observing and providing feedback to teachers, but the path is strewn with land mines. Teachers may be skeptical of unsolicited advice from administrators, especially when it's a once-a-year event that reduces the complex world of the classroom to a one-page checklist.
"Teachers' involvement is an irreducible requirement," concludes Milbrey McLaughlin (1990); meaningful evaluation requires "a culture for evaluation" that goes beyond appointing teachers to steering committees. Considerable interaction is needed to create shared goals and understandings about evaluation and its relation to school improvement.

This dialogue has generated a variety of successful approaches in which teachers take the lead: mentoring, peer coaching, teaching clinics, portfolios. Although their involvement is less apparent, principals play a crucial role by supporting the new approaches, providing logistical support, and offering encouragement to teachers who may have reservations about assuming unfamiliar roles. Even after establishing the evaluation system, review and revision will be ongoing.

HOW DO FACILITATIVE LEADERS MANAGE AND ASSESS THE

INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM?Traditionally, curriculum leadership has been viewed as a series of technical tasks establishing objectives, monitoring scope and sequence, choosing textbooks, and selecting appropriate tests with the principal exercising final responsibility for all decisions.

Recent work has documented the ability of teachers to make major decisions about content and methods, not only individually in their own classrooms, but collectively on a schoolwide basis. However, this kind of curriculum-making, which requires extensive dialogue, must be grounded in teacher autonomy that is endorsed and supported by school leaders (Michele Monson and Robert Monson 1993).

The same applies to assessment. Many schools have been exploring alternative forms of evaluation (such as authentic assessment and learning exhibits) that require professional judgment. Teachers who actively participate in formulating assessments are more likely to understand them and to take a more thoughtful approach to their own instructional methods. But this happens only when teachers are provided the time and support to work through the issues together (Kate Jamentz 1994).

Clearly, the evolution of facilitative approaches has not eliminated the underlying functions of instructional leadership, nor the need for expert, dynamic practitioners. But today's principals are being challenged to carry out those functions in ways that are less direct and more collaborative. The goal is not to do it, but to see that it happens.

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