



6-14-2019

Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership

Jonathan A. Supovitz
University of Pennsylvania, JONS@GSE.UPENN.EDU

John D'Auria
William James College

James P. Spillane
Northwestern University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Supovitz, Jonathan A.; D'Auria, John; and Spillane, James P. (2019). Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership. *CPRE Research Reports*.

Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/112

Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership

Abstract

School leadership is broadly acknowledged to be the lynchpin for school success. Yet, amongst the countless demands that school leaders face, making wise leadership choices is increasingly challenging. On what should leaders focus their attention and how should they prioritize their improvement efforts? How can they identify, understand, and make headway on the difficult challenges that will substantially enhance the educational experiences of their students, and how can they bring their faculty together with commitment around these improvement efforts?

In this essay we lay out a research-informed framework for advancing meaningful school improvement using a distributed leadership approach.

This report was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Opinions in this paper reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, that of the funder.

Keywords

Distributed Leadership

Disciplines

Education | Educational Leadership



CONSORTIUM *for* POLICY
RESEARCH *in* EDUCATION

Research Report

June 2019

Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership

Jonathan A. Supovitz, University of Pennsylvania

John D'Auria, William James College

James P. Spillane, Northwestern University



BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

cpre.org  @CPRÉresearch

Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership

June 2019

Consortium for Policy Research in Education

Jonathan A. Supovitz (jons@upenn.edu)
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

John D'Auria (John_DAuria@williamjames.edu)
William James College

James P. Spillane (j-spillane@northwestern.edu)
Northwestern University

Suggested Citation

Supovitz, J.; D'Auria, J.; & Spillane, J. (2019). *Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership* (#RR 2019–2). Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Access this report at: https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/112

This report was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Opinions in this paper reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, that of the funder.

© 2019 Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania

Table of Contents

- 1. About the Authors, 4**
- 2. Acknowledgements, 5**
- 3. Overview, 7**
- 4. The work of school leaders, 11**
- 5. The distributed leadership perspective, 15**
 - a. Who are the leaders in a school from the distributed leadership perspective? 16
 - b. What (and where) is leadership practice from the distributed leadership perspective? 19
- 6. What are the conditions and leadership skills that foster distributed leadership? 21**
 - a. The power of conditions, 22
 - b. Critical conditions for engaging in improvement, 23
 - i. Psychological safety, 23
 - ii. Trust, 24
 - iii. A culture of mutual learning (instead of a culture of blame), 24
 - c. Leadership skills that maximize a leader's ability to facilitate improvement, 25
 - i. Listening in stereo, 25
 - ii. Being curious in the face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas, 26
 - iii. Balancing inquiry with advocacy, 27
- 7. What kinds of decisions can be improved using distributed leadership, 27**
- 8. Distributed leadership as a companion to continuous improvement, 29**
 - a. Distributed leadership in problem diagnosis, 31
 - b. Distributed leadership in solution design and enactment, 34
 - c. Distributed leadership in action review, 38
- 9. Managing the risks of using distributed leadership for improvement, 38**
 - a. The discomfort of public disagreement, 39
 - b. The challenge of addressing non-discussables, 39
 - c. Navigating power differentials, 40
 - d. Making sense of emotions, 40
- 10. Meaningful and sustainable school improvement with distributed leadership, 41**
- 11. Activities, 45–63**

About the Authors



Jonathan A. Supovitz is the Executive Director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. He has published findings from numerous educational studies and evaluations of school and district reform efforts and the effects of professional development on teacher and leader practice. His current research focuses on how schools and districts use different forms of data to support the improvement of teaching and learning.



John D'Auria is part of the core faculty for Organizational & Leadership Psychology at William James College. His research focuses on the ways in which the assumptions that people hold about intelligence significantly influence their learning. Dr. D'Auria co-authored *School Systems That Learn* with Dr. Paul Ash (Corwin Press, 2012) and is the author of *Ten Lessons in Leadership and Learning* (2010), a resource geared toward new and experienced leaders. Additionally, Dr. D'Auria co-authored *How To Bring Vision to School Improvement* (Research for Better Teaching, 1993) with Dr. Jon Saphier. He is a frequent speaker at national and regional educational conferences and has served as an executive coach to a wide variety of educational leaders across the country.



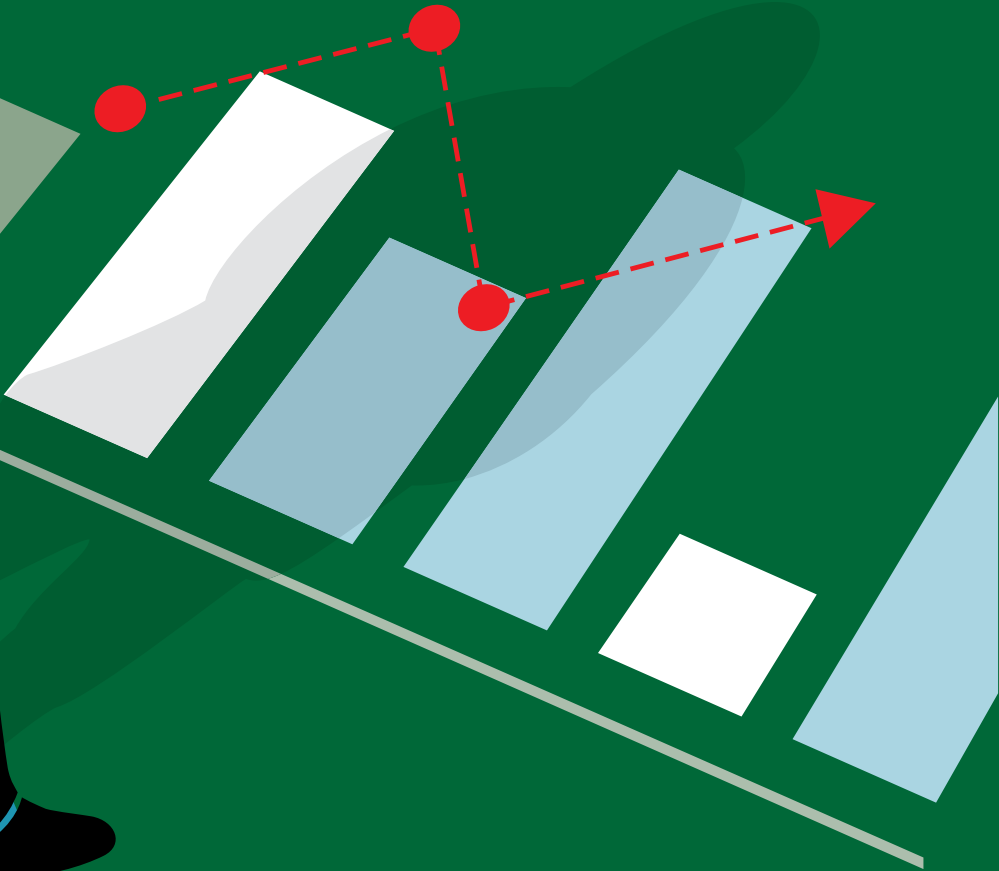
James P. Spillane's work explores the policy implementation process at the state, school district, school and classroom levels. He has worked to develop a cognitive perspective on the implementation process, exploring how local policymakers and practitioners come to understand state and national reforms. Spillane is also interested in organizational leadership and change. His work conceptualizes organizational leadership as a distributed practice involving formal and informal leaders, followers, and a variety of organizational tools and artifacts. His most recent projects include a social network analysis of instructional advice structures in elementary schools, a study of how organizational routines enable and constrain practice in schools, and an examination of the selection and socialization of school principals.

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the generous contributions of numerous people and we heartfully thank them here. Sharin Park capably managed the project from start to finish. Sharin helped schedule and debrief numerous video conference calls amongst the three authors and collected and organized the resources and activities that support and enrich multiple report sections. Our Gates Foundation program officer, Amy Slamp sagely helped to keep the project moving across the 14 months of its evolution. Amy knew when to give us latitude, encouragement, critical feedback, and helped us set goals along the way.

The report was immeasurably improved from two meetings where school leaders and school leadership program providers provided valuable feedback on the evolving framework. The first meeting, held in July 2018, included Christina Alvarez of the Design Lab Schools; Nimet Eren, the principal of Kensington Health Sciences Academy in Philadelphia; Dennis Perry, the principal of Cherry Hill East High School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey; and Noah Tennant, the CEO of Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. The keen grounded perspectives of these school leaders helped us to clarify and sharpen many of the arguments and themes we were struggling to convey.

The second project meeting took place in November 2018 and was arranged by the Gates Foundation. Attendees represented some of the major leadership development organizations in the United States and included Frederick Brown, the Deputy Executive Director of Learning Forward; Chong-Hao Fu, the CEO of Leading Educators; Nancy Gutierrez, the President & CEO, NYC Leadership Academy; Beverly Hutton, the Chief Program Officer of National Association of Secondary School Principals; John Jenkins, the Deputy Chief Officer, New Leaders for New Schools; Rasheed Meadows, the Vice President of the The New Teacher Project; Max Silverman, the Executive Director of University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership; and Michelle Young, the Executive Director of the University Council for Educational Administration and a professor of Education at the University of Virginia. This group provided us with a sharp-minded but friendly forum to present our ideas and get feedback from a variety of perspectives and from people with deep and practical experience developing school leaders in education systems representing a variety of contexts. Finally, we would like to thank Bridget Goldhahn of CPRE for designing and laying out the report.



Overview

School leadership is broadly acknowledged to be the lynchpin for school success. Yet, amongst the countless demands that school leaders face, making wise leadership choices is increasingly challenging. On what should leaders focus their attention and how should they prioritize their improvement efforts? How can they identify, understand, and make headway on the difficult challenges that will substantially enhance the educational experiences of their students, and how can they bring their faculty together with commitment around these improvement efforts?

In this essay we lay out a research-informed framework for advancing meaningful school improvement using a distributed leadership approach. Why distributed leadership? We argue that distributed leadership is useful in two ways. First, distributed leadership provides insights about leadership by examining leadership practice through a particular lens. There is a kaleidoscope of perspectives on leadership: transformational leadership, authentic leadership, instructional leadership, symbolic leadership, and distributed leadership, to name just a few. These lenses are useful insofar as they provide leaders with a perspective on their own practice and the practice of others around them. Each of these perspectives provides leaders with distinct insights that bring certain aspects of their activity and the environment to the forefront, while de-emphasizing other elements of leadership activity. The question should not be whether to become an instructional leader or a distributed leader, but what wisdom can be derived from each perspective to become a more incisive leader, and how aspects of each can be incorporated into one's leadership repertoire. From its vantage point, distributed leadership provides

Distributed leadership expands our attention beyond the actions of individual leaders to their interactions with others that lead to the joint activity that underlies virtually all leadership energy in schools.

a powerful lens for understanding the ways in which leadership practice occurs in schools.

The second distinct advantage of distributed leadership is that it provides an organizing principle for selectively involving more members of the school community in the improvement process and, in doing so, gaining both more diverse perspectives into the underlying causes of challenging problems and a shared commitment to the solutions that emerge. Distributed leadership can help to inform who should participate in the key activities of problem diagnosis, solution design, intervention, and after-action review that are the essential components of continuous improvement. In this way, distributed leadership is an essential companion to the continuous improvement

processes that are increasingly recognized as the ways to make headway on impediments to consequential school improvement.

The essay begins with an analysis of the diverse work of school leaders, which often diverts attention from a central goal of school leadership: to improve the conditions for high quality teaching that strengthens the educational experiences of students. Few schools are as good as they wish to be, and many school leaders struggle to find the time to engage in substantive improvement efforts. To accomplish the goal of improvement, school leaders need to engage in an ongoing process of investigating and understanding the core impediments to improvement, carefully developing and enacting strategies to make headway on them, and revising the strategies as better knowledge becomes available. Distributed leadership is an essential companion to the learning required for meaningful engagement in the continuous improvement process.

As a basis for engaging in school improvement efforts, it is essential that leaders become more aware of how they currently spend their time and energy. While there are myriad ways of organizing school leadership work, one useful approach is to consider leadership effort as three overlapping areas: (1) putting out fires; (2) maintaining smooth-running organizational systems, and; (3) enacting meaningful improvement. Putting out fires reflects the spontaneous events that continually arise that demand leaders' time and energy, whether they be a student health crisis, a leak in the auditorium, or an unanticipated weather-related early dismissal. Putting out fires is an unrelenting and unavoidable aspect of school leadership.

Organizational maintenance refers to the managerial demands of school leadership, whether they be attending regular leadership team

meetings, conducting classroom visits, organizing and participating in instructional rounds, or sitting in on a grade-level professional learning community meeting. All schools develop a host of important routines, and managing and facilitating these established structures is another essential dimension of school leadership.

Beyond fire control and maintenance, meaningful and sustainable school improvement is the ultimate goal of educational leadership. Leaders are constantly being asked to introduce changes – large and small – into their schools, and/or initiating changes themselves. These reforms are the means by which schools get better at their core mission of improving the educational experiences of students for which so much of childrens' opportunities depend. Yet rarely do we see these improvement efforts result in substantial increases in school outcomes. Why is this the case? We believe this essay will help shed light on the conundrum of the unsatisfying legacy of school improvement efforts.

Engaging in meaningful and sustainable school improvement, which can also reduce the time spent putting out fires and reorienting managerial activities, requires that school leaders shift their understanding of the nature of leadership practice. This is where the distributed leadership perspective can be particularly insightful. The distributed perspective expands our conception of leadership beyond focusing solely on people formally titled as leaders towards the many roles that people play in the array of social situations which make up the school community. Relationships are at the core of schooling, and attention to distributed leadership expands our attention beyond the actions of individual leaders to their interactions with others that lead to the joint activity that underlies virtually all leadership energy in schools. Incorporating the distributed perspective into leaders' conceptions of their work opens up important pathways that allow leaders to channel more brainpower and diverse perspectives into their efforts to substantially improve the educational experiences of students.

This expanded notion of leadership practice, which involves attention to not only the actions of school leaders but their interactions with others and the resulting differential levels of congruous activity, has five important elements. These are:

- 1. Recognizing, positioning, and utilizing resources for leadership.** A greater awareness of both formal and informal leadership in schools can result in more attention to utilizing these capacities to facilitate management and improvement efforts.
- 2. Developing a set of leadership skills** which emphasize enacting influence rather than relying largely on authority. Authority often generates

compliance rather than the commitment to change that leads to deeper engagement and more meaningful collaboration. These skills include listening simultaneously to both the content of conversations and the underlying emotions being expressed through them; managing one's own emotions during uncomfortable conversations; and not jumping too quickly from a position of exploring promising ideas to advocating for them, which puts one in a position of prematurely defending something that may turn out to be unfruitful.

3. Using leadership skills to craft a set of organizational conditions that encourage the engagement that produces improvement.

Most prominent is the importance of developing a culture of psychological safety, trust, and mutual learning, which frees people to take the risk of speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, and to candidly discuss mistakes and missteps.

4. Involving a broader array of stakeholders as leaders in the continuous improvement process.

Distributing leadership provides the opportunity to engage differently with improvement efforts by utilizing a deeper process of problem diagnosis that involves a broader set of school actors and their perspectives, and solution design and enactment that engages those integral to the process. Since it is rare to get at the root cause of a problem the first time, distributed leadership across a cyclical process of diagnosis, design, and redesign is integral.

5. Navigating the challenges associated with distributed leadership for meaningful and sustainable school improvement.

It is important for leaders to realize that this process is not without challenges; it requires leaders to skillfully navigate a series of predictable consequences and potential conflicts that may arise as leaders unleash the creative forces necessary to produce deep and lasting progress.

Finally, there is a duality in this essay which we want to be clear about. In the early part of the essay we speak of the *perspective of distributed leadership* as a lens to better understand important aspects of the nature of leadership in schools. Here we argue that distributed leadership is a regular condition of schooling, and that leadership is dispersed across the range of school actors. Some of these actors recognize themselves as leaders, while others do not think of themselves as leaders nor aspects of their work as leadership. Furthermore, the social structures of schooling, which are the rules,

beliefs, practices, materials, and social norms that govern expected behavior, influence the extent to which people feel empowered to enact leadership. In the latter part of this essay we switch from using the lens of distributed leadership to understand the diffusion of leadership in schools to describing the explicit *utilization of distributed leadership*. Here we discuss ways to employ distributed leadership to both analyze challenging problems and design interventions that can move a school forward, not only because of the advantages of involving more diverse perspectives in the improvement process, but also due to the resulting gains in faculty commitment by engaging more people in the process. In doing so we move from a description of leadership to a normative claim: that distributed leadership can be used to not only understand school leadership, but to actually improve the actions of leaders. In doing so we argue that distributed leadership is an essential element of meaningful and sustainable school improvement.

The Work of School Leaders

The sheer breadth of what school leaders do can take your breath away. The list of leadership activities is long and multi-directional – from thought activities like vision-setting and classroom-based efforts like instructional monitoring to organizational endeavors like faculty meetings, outward-facing efforts like community relations, and student activities like managing student discipline. With so many different and diverse tasks, ranging from time-intensive to spur-of-the-moment, from sporadic to regular, how can we make sense of them all?

ACTIVITY 1 | The Work of School Leaders

Key Concept: School leadership activity can be organized into three sets of functions: putting out fires, maintaining the organization, and engaging in reform activities.

Theme in paper: The Work of School Leaders

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

Because school leaders' duties are so broad and varied, there have been multiple efforts to organize and distill the multitude of tasks required to set up and keep schools running and improving. One well-known take on organizing school leader efforts is Marzano's Balanced Leadership

framework¹, which scoured the research literature for studies where leadership activity was correlated to improvements in student performance. The Balanced Leadership framework organizes leadership activities into those that facilitate school support and those that support teachers. School supports included things like organizing school time, developing a safe and orderly climate, parental involvement, monitoring instruction, and fostering accountability for

1 1 Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us about the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement. A Working Paper.

Putting out fires. Maintaining the organization. Engaging in improvement. These three efforts encapsulate the bulk of activity of school leaders.

academic achievement. Teacher supports include classroom curriculum organization and design, teacher use of research-based instructional strategies, and communication and enforcement of classroom conduct and discipline approaches. School supports and teacher supports are one way to organize the work of school leaders.

Numerous studies have tracked principal activity to see what aspects are related to student learning. In another well-regarded study², principal leadership efforts that were positively related to teachers' instructional practices and student outcomes were organized in three major categories: (1) setting mission and goals; (2) developing trust with the faculty, and; (3) focusing

on instruction. Focusing on instruction, however, is challenging for school leaders. A 2010 study³ tracked 65 Florida principals for a week and organized their activities into six categories: administration, organization and management, day-to-day instruction, instructional program oversight, internal relations, and external relations. The researchers found that principals spent almost half of their time (49%) on organization and management, about 15% of their time on internal relations, and just 13% on instructional activities. There is even a principal time tracker called School Administration Manager, or SAM, which organizes principals' time into five categories (office work preparation, supervision of employees, student supervision, decision-making committees, groups and meetings, and student discipline) to help principals increase their time on instruction.⁴

These studies are valuable in suggesting where time should be allocated, but they overstate the extent to which leadership time allocations are both explicit and controllable. Allocations are influenced not only by personal and supervisory priorities but by a plethora of unforeseen, often daily, problems that emerge and need immediate attention: a fight in the cafeteria, a sudden teacher illness necessitating classroom coverage, an upset parent entering the building, a racial epithet written on a locker. These events require quick attention and can absorb a large quantity of energy. There is also an underlying imperative to these emotionally laden issues: if they are not resolved quickly, a leader's effectiveness can be called into question. Consequently, many leaders find themselves spending more time "putting out fires" than what they aspire or plan to do.

2 Supovitz, J., Sirinides, P., & May, H. (2010). How principals and peers influence teaching and learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(1), 31-56.

3 Horng, E. L., Klasik, D., & Loeb, S. (2010). Principal's time use and school effectiveness. *American Journal of Education*, 116(4), 491-523.

4 www.samsconnect.com

Similarly, maintaining a smooth-running school where transportation, schedules, recess, concerts, assemblies, standardized testing, safety drills, etc. are seamlessly implemented and do not disrupt teaching and learning requires technical and operational finesse as well as creative approaches to finance, contracts, and human dynamics. The maintenance of school operations demands continual upkeep. This work, when combined with the time needed to address unforeseen and urgent issues often leaves fewer opportunities than leaders need for creating and introducing new approaches to instruction, curriculum, social and emotional development, and other methods of strengthening and improving their school's educational offerings.

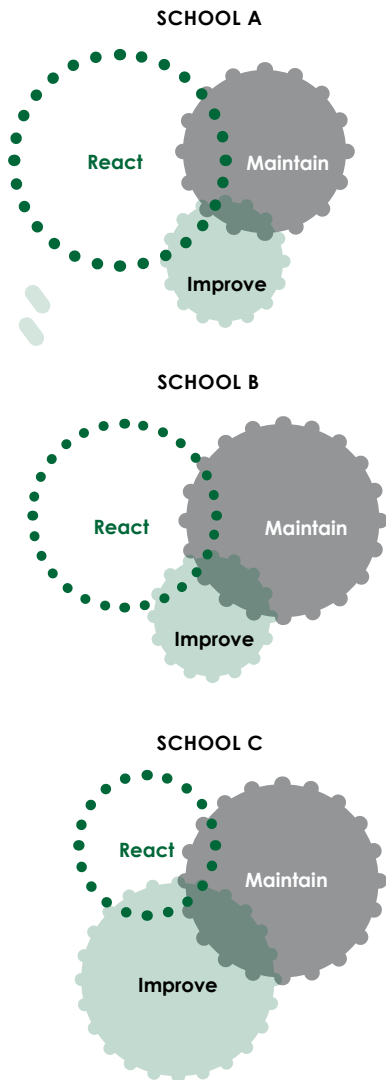
Educational leaders wrestle with these dynamics in order to create a balance that addresses all of their responsibilities, daily pressures, and operational needs while investing in ways to improve. A foray into the unknown offers promise, but is uncertain and fraught with tensions where the demands of the immediate drown out what ultimately might be more important. While there is no magic formula for managing this complexity well, what often gets short shrift is a deep and sustained approach to improvement.

The diverse range of school leadership efforts and the need to reduce the complexity of leadership activities into a simpler pattern leads us to offer a more basic way of organizing school leadership activity that we think reflects not just the actions that school leaders engage in, but the underlying purpose of these activities within the rhythm of schooling.

We organize school leadership activity into three over-riding sets of functions: putting out fires, maintaining the organization, and engaging in reform activities.

- 1. Putting out Fires** — It is in the nature of schooling, no matter the context, that things will always arise in schools demanding immediate attention: a burst water pipe, a student behavioral concern, a personnel issue, a parent complaint. These circumstances require quick and reactive responses.
- 2. Maintaining the Organization** — When leaders take stock of their daily and weekly activities, they find that a lot of their time goes to pre-planned and impromptu meetings with a range of people, including their leadership team, faculty teams, community members, parents, and students. Beyond meetings, school leaders often have a series of regularly scheduled activities that might include greeting students and parents in the

Three Types of School Leadership Activities



morning, observing classrooms and providing feedback to teachers, discussing curricular changes, and maintaining visibility at school dismissal. All of these routines are integral to maintaining the regular functioning of the school.

3. Engaging in Improvement — Schools are constantly seeking to improve their quality, as leaders introduce new programs, practices, and reforms that are intended to improve the quality of students' educational experiences. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus might have been talking about schools when he said, "the only thing constant is change." Educational reforms come in all sizes and incarnations; some are minor adjustments to current routines, others require major adjustments for the entire faculty, and still others are localized to a particular subject area or grade level. In many cases, these reforms are initiated at another level of the education system – districts or even states – and school leaders are expected to implement them as best they can in their context. In other cases, school leaders have internal ideas about ways to improve their schools and embark upon self-initiated reforms. But one thing that most improvement efforts have in common is that the problems they are trying to address are thorny and complex. These difficult challenges that school leaders face defy easy solution and often have their roots in larger social ills. Educators strive for things like equitable learning opportunities, consistently strong instructional quality, and emotionally stable learning environments, but such goals are not easily achieved. Therefore, to make headway on these difficult challenges, school leaders need a particular set of skills and commitment.

Putting out fires. Maintaining the organization. Engaging in improvement. These three efforts encapsulate the bulk of activity of school leaders. One could easily imagine schools with different emphasis on these three types of activities. For example, School A above expends more effort putting out fires than it does maintaining the organization or introducing reforms. School B puts more effort into reacting to crises and routine practices, while giving less attention to improvement efforts. School C expends less effort on putting out fires, and gives more attention to improvement.

All three of these activities are inherently part of the fabric of school leadership. But this doesn't mean that school leaders can't reduce the amount of time reacting to situations, adjust regular maintenance activities to make the best use of limited time and resources, and

implement and choose reforms to increase the chances that they achieve their promise.

One advantage of framing school leadership as reacting, maintaining, and improving is that leaders can better understand both the exigency of putting out fires and the necessity of maintaining a smooth running organization. But ultimately, the mark of leadership is whether we can make things substantially better for kids than they currently are. No matter the circumstance of a school, whether it is in a poor rural area, in a small blue collar city, or in one of the nation's urban centers, leaders are constantly under pressure to improve. In fact, we think that one major goal of leadership is to recapture time by minimizing (although they can never be eliminated) the exhausting, reactive efforts to douse fires, reconsidering the purpose and effectiveness of maintenance activities, and therefore securing more time to dedicate to productive processes that will move the school forward in significant ways. Distributed leadership offers a particular way of thinking about framing this recapturing task.

We use this frame of responding to events, maintaining the current system, and introducing change as the backdrop of our framework as we examine questions of how leadership functions and the role of distributed leadership in meaningful school improvement activities.

The Distributed Leadership Perspective

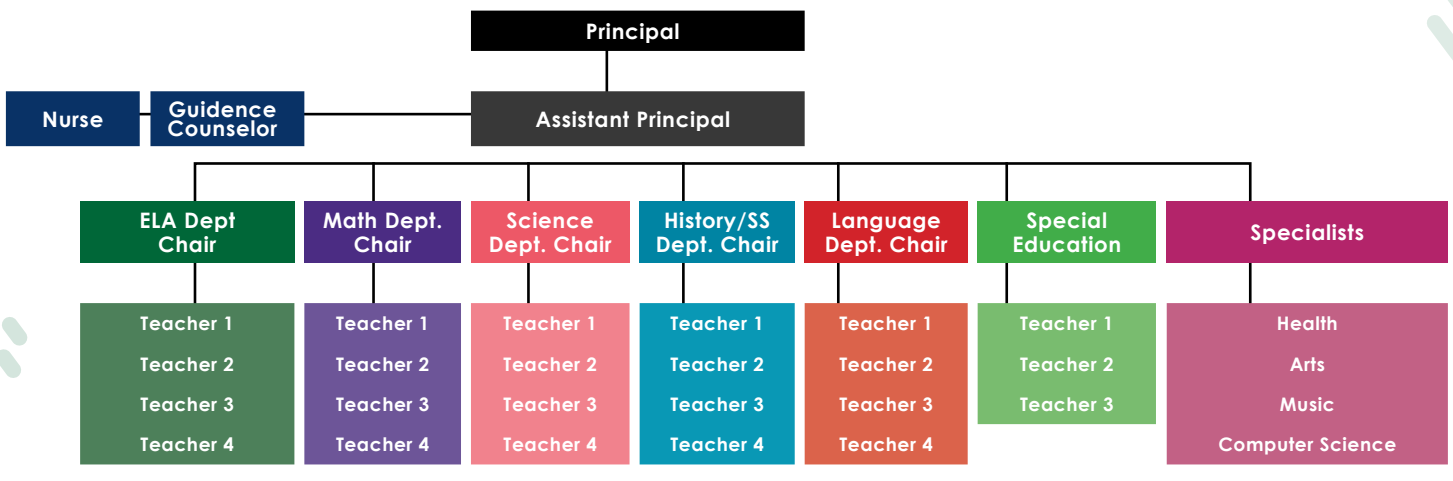
Part of the challenge for school leaders who seek to “enact” distributed leadership is to gain a strong grasp of what it is, and what it is not. There are many definitions floating around on the internet and in the school research literature. Some define the concept as the formal leader's (i.e. the principal) delegating leadership tasks

to others. Others define distributed leadership as the formation of a school leadership team that contains multiple stakeholders organized to support instructional improvement. We take a broader view. We argue that the distributed leadership is a lens to understand a range of leadership activities which contribute to the fulfilling of the organization's mission. This perspective grows out of the simple observation that leadership activity in schools, just as it is in all social organizations, is much broader

“Leadership is hard to define, and good leadership even harder. But if you can get people to follow you to the ends of the earth, you are a great leader.”

Indra Nooyi
Former CEO of PepsiCo

Example of School Organization Chart



and more complex than just the actions of formal leaders like the principal, assistant principal, and department chairs. Leadership is the influence that emerges out of a series of interactions amongst people (leaders and followers) during the process of engaging in a particular task.

To gain a better sense of how to understand leadership using the distributed leadership perspective, let's examine two questions:

1. Who are the leaders in a school from the distributed leadership perspective?
2. What (and where) is leadership practice from the distributed leadership perspective?

Who are the leaders of a school from the distributed leadership perspective?

There are several different ways to think about who actually are the leaders in a school. A common response is to list the formal school leaders such as the principal, assistant principal, and perhaps even department chairs. This response is to be expected; these individuals hold positions that are typically labeled as leadership positions and

the associated responsibilities look a lot like those commonly attributed to leaders. Further, as depicted in the figure above, the typical school organizational chart arrays these individuals with leadership positions at the top in a hierarchical arrangement that demarcates lines of authority.

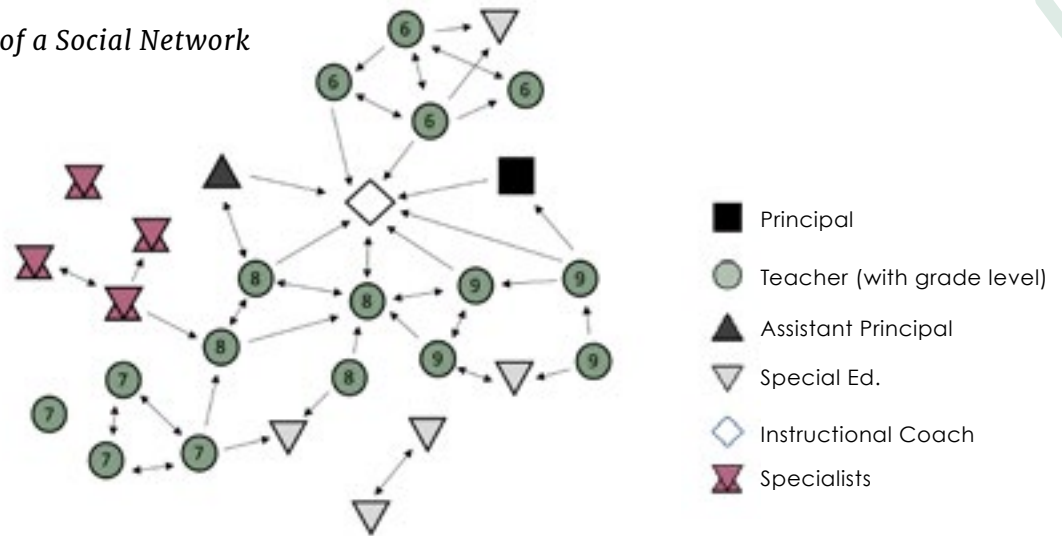
ACTIVITY 2 | The DL Perspective

Key Concept: Formal titles and positions may not align with the influence that individuals have.

Theme in paper: The DL Perspective - Who are the leaders of a school from the DL Perspective (3a)

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

Example of a Social Network



On reflection, however, the question is more complex than it first appears. Would we consider the teachers in our buildings who are in charge of different committees to be leaders? What about the teachers who take on important responsibilities tied to improving teaching and learning without any formal recognition or title? Are they leaders? The blurry line between the titles that people have and the work they actually do has prompted the field to make distinctions like formal leadership, informal leadership, and teacher leadership, and to think more broadly about how leadership is actually arrayed in schools.

To illustrate the distinction between formal and informal leadership, compare a school's organization chart, like that depicted in the figure above, to a social network map of actual interactions about instruction, like the one depicted in the following figure.

The social network map shows survey responses to the question about who school faculty go to when they have questions about instruction. The organization chart shows the formal positions and hierarchy of the school organization and members' official job responsibilities. By contrast, the social network captures the influence of both formal and informal school leaders by capturing who they actually provide support to about instructional issues. We can see from the diagram that the instructional coach (ICON) is the most central person in the instructional assistance network. Teachers (ICON) are largely grouped by their grade level affiliations, but there are certain teachers (with shaded circles) who are more central than others. These teachers are playing informal leadership roles in their school. Additionally, there are some teachers who act as connectors to teachers at other grade levels. Additionally, some special education teachers are more connected to the grade level networks than others. The specialists of the school are largely separated in their own network. The principal

and assistant principal in this school are important leaders in the organizational chart, but less so in the instructional network.

The overall point is that the social network gives us a different perspective than does the organizational chart. We can see that the teachers who are central in the instructional assistance network are more instructionally influential than the formal school leaders. Excluding these teachers as we look for leadership in a school, just because they lack a formal leadership position, would lead to an incomplete assessment of school leadership.

“Leadership is not about a title or a designation. It’s about impact, influence, and inspiration.”

Robin S. Sharma

Contrasting these two depictions of how leadership is arranged in schools helps us to distinguish between formal authority and enacted influence. Indeed, leadership as influence is one of the major concepts that is highlighted via the distributed leadership perspective. It is a concept shared by a number of scholars, who point to important leaders in society who had tremendous influence but not

formal authority (think Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Galileo). These individuals exerted their influence by employing a range of personal and interpersonal qualities including their moral suasion, wisdom, and expertise. The social network map allows us to see actual influence at work in a school, including the enacted influence of formal leaders who we cannot just assume exercise influence because of their formal authority.

Thinking about the source of leadership helps us to distinguish between positional authority and social influence. Leadership as influence also enables us to appreciate how formal school leaders might tap into and capitalize upon a wider array of resources that can be mobilized by leadership. By identifying, positioning, and otherwise enabling those who have influence, and who are willing to take on leadership responsibilities, formal leaders can mobilize a whole set of ‘leadership resources’ that would not be available if they relied only on those individuals in formal leadership roles. It does not always behoove formal leaders to coopt informal leadership, and informal leaders sometimes prefer to operate without recognition or explicit responsibility, but even an awareness of their contributions helps to see the broader set of activities that make up professional and social interactions in schools.

One implication of framing leadership in terms of who actually exercises influence, rather than just who has a formal leadership

position, is that it nudges us to attend to the practice of leadership: how leadership actually happens inside schools from one day to the next. It gets us beyond leadership plans and intentions to its actual enactment in the day-to-day life of the school.

Hence, we have to do more than simply identify where leadership is in a school, and begin asking how leadership practice happens.

What and Where is leadership practice from the distributed leadership perspective?

To understand how leadership happens, it is necessary to focus on leadership practice.⁵ Educators know the importance of attending to practice. Most educational leaders spend a lot of time working to improve the quality of teaching in their buildings. In doing so, leaders don't just focus on who the teachers are, what they know, and the lesson plans they write. Rather, they go into classrooms and watch teaching practice up close, because they know that the quality of the teaching is one of the things that matters most for children's learning. Teachers can get advanced degrees, take frequent workshops, and gain lots of experience, but it all amounts to nothing if the quality of the teaching practice is not effective. To appraise the quality of teaching one has to observe the practice of teaching.

ACTIVITY 3 | Interactions

Key Concept: Distributed leadership practice encourages leaders to attend not just to action, but interactions which produce a fuller picture on the practice of school leadership.

Theme in paper: Interactions

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

Thus, we can think about teaching practice as teaching in action. Teaching in action, however, involves more than just the moves of the teacher. When you go into a classroom to observe instruction, what do you look at to judge the quality of the teaching practice? It's likely that you do not focus solely on the behaviors of the teacher,

such as her use of wait time or whether or not she offered sufficient praise of students. Instead, you attend to what the teacher did, how one or more students reacted to that, and how the teacher reacted to the student or students, and so on. We focus on the interactions among the teacher and students (including student-to-student interactions) because that is where teaching practice happens. In addition to the actions of the teacher, it is within the quality of their interactions with students that we understand the effectiveness of teaching practice.

Indeed, we wager that any conclusions drawn about the quality of the teaching in that classroom have to do chiefly with the interactions; not simply what question the teacher asked but how one or more students responded to it and, in turn, how the teacher

5 Spillane, J. P. (2012). *Distributed leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

responded to what the student(s) said. It is all about the interactions. So, while things like wait time and use of praise matter (at least that's what a few decades of process-product research on teaching tells us), we know teaching is not just about the teacher's actions; it is also about the interactions that unfold as teacher and students interact to co-produce teaching.

The same holds for leadership – it's all about the practice of leadership. Creating new leadership positions or introducing a new organizational routine such as instructional rounds or learning walks will contribute little to improving instruction unless these things improve the practice of leadership. Now, when we think about what leadership practice is, many of us will jump immediately to the actions that we take as individual leaders. In some respects this makes good sense, because the things that we do as leaders are an important part of leadership. Thinking back to the previous section – where we organized leadership activity into putting out fires, maintaining the organization, and implementing reforms – most of the examples focused on the actions of leaders as individuals.

To understand leadership practice, we have to attend to interactions, looking closely not only at what the leader or leaders do and say but how other participants respond and how the leaders treat these responses.

But just as with teaching practice, focusing only on actions is not enough if we want to understand the full meaning of leadership practice. We must attend to the interactions amongst leaders and school staff more broadly, which form an essential, yet under-attended, aspect of leadership practice, and in which leadership practice unfolds and takes form. Take the performance of a faculty meeting or school improvement planning meeting by way of example. The actions of the principal or assistant principal, such as calling the meeting to order, ensuring everyone gets a chance to have a say, and keeping the participants on task, are important. But the practice of leadership involves more than these actions; it also involves the back and forth amongst the participants. It is in these interactions that the definitions of a problem (a key leadership activity) are negotiated and worked out, as participants argue and deliberate with one another. It is in these interactions that alternatives are considered and a plan of action is decided. It is amidst the interactions that participants take ownership of the plan of action or feel separated from it. To understand leadership practice, therefore,

we have to attend to these interactions, looking closely not only at what the leader or leaders do and say but how other participants respond and how the leaders treat these responses. Influence rarely happens through a single action – a leader's decree or command. Rather, influence is exercised in the back and forth of interactions amongst people as they change their minds, develop new understandings, or come to see something in a new light.

Under-attention to leadership interactions may be due to two factors. One has to do with the more unique place that individuals are situated in American mythology, and the second has to do with the more specific and special considerations of schooling. America has long had a romance with the notion of the individual overcoming all odds to heroically prevail. The heroic leader has a long tradition in America, going back to the founding fathers. Indeed, the term “rugged individualism” was coined by Herbert Hoover in 1931 to exhort Americans to persist during the Great Depression. With this tradition, we tend to look for individuals to solve problems through their leadership actions, rather than the more mundane and realistic considerations that decision-making in organizations is negotiated through an interactive process of group deliberation. This does not negate the importance of leadership, but rather it expands the terrain upon which it unfolds.

The second factor that may contribute to under-attention to leadership interactions is the rather unique structure of American schools. In the American tradition, schools are highly decentralized places which rely on the expertise and autonomy of teachers to make decisions within classrooms amongst students. And they tend to be relatively flat organizations with most staff reporting directly to the principal. Thus, schools have many teachers but only a few formal leaders. If leadership is only the work of formal leaders, then we must rely on the school's principal to lead. Yet, by stretching leadership responsibility and activity across a greater group of individuals, and conceiving of leadership as the outcome of interactions amongst adults within schools, then leadership is a broader conception than just the work of a few.

What are the conditions and leadership skills that foster distributed leadership?

For the remainder of this paper we transition from a descriptive distributed leadership perspective to a normative view of distributed leadership that might be fostered by formal school leaders. Viewing distributed leadership normatively suggests that there are ways

that school leaders should take actions to incorporate distributed leadership into their school improvement strategies. In particular, when it comes to more difficult and intractable problems, a distributed approach has a higher probability of providing the leader with a richer understanding of the problem, and higher commitment to whatever innovations and recommendations flow from the process. A leader needs both insight and commitment to go from theory to action. For these kinds of problems, we recommend the distributed approach because it provides greater insight, thoughtfulness in the design, and internal commitment. For those reasons we think this approach is a good fit for engaging in continuous improvement around particularly challenging school problems. Before discussing the role of distributed leadership in the continuous improvement process, let us describe some of the basic school conditions and leadership skills that facilitate the use of distributed leadership.

The distributed approach provides greater insight, thoughtfulness in the design, and internal commitment. It is a good fit for engaging in continuous improvement around particularly challenging school problems.

The power of conditions

Though we like to think we fully control our interactions with others, we don't! Our interactions are highly influenced by a variety of context-dependent conditions. Scholars like to refer to these conditions, mostly taken for granted, as social structure. Social structure includes various things ranging from the social norms that govern expected behavior, the organizational routines which guide much of our activity, the agendas and protocols we choose, and even the language we use to communicate, to name just a few of the social conditions that mediate our interactions. These conditions do not simply influence our interactions; we could even go so far as to say they largely define how we interact with one another. For this reason, increasing our awareness of the social structures within which we operate is integral to leadership practice and its effectiveness.

To appreciate the extent to which social structures define our interactions, let's go back to the last time you sat in a classroom to perform a required evaluation of a teacher's practice. If you reflect on this experience, you will come to appreciate that the practice of evaluating the teaching takes form as it unfolds in the interactions

between the supervisor and the teacher, but these interactions are also fundamentally defined by taken-for-granted aspects of the situation. Most obviously, the teacher evaluation protocol you used not only shaped what was paid attention to but also what the teacher expected the supervisor to attend to. Moreover, as a leader conducts a post-observation interview/debrief with the teacher, items from that protocol were likely used to negotiate understanding of what was noticed and what it said about the quality of the teaching. At the same time, the interactions were very likely fundamentally shaped by a set of norms that neither you or the teacher explicitly named – perhaps something as simple as ‘begin the debrief by describing what you saw rather than making a value judgement.’ More complex norms (we will address this more fully in part five) could also guide whether a teacher feels safe to illuminate where she thought the lesson could be improved. This is how the conditions define practice by shaping how we interact with one another.

Critical conditions for engaging in improvement

While there are a host of conditions that influence our social and professional interactions, we think three are especially pertinent for leaders to create the environment where people can engage deeply with the challenges of substantive improvement.

Psychological Safety. An essential condition for high quality interactions amongst adults within professional settings is psychological safety. According to Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, an expert on teams in organizations, psychological safety is the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.⁶ The degree to which educators are able to share vulnerabilities, acknowledge mistakes, respectfully disagree, and challenge the thinking of colleagues as well as those with more status and power provides insight into the perceived level of psychological safety within an organization. One of the key ways that a leader can contribute to psychological safety is when he or she chooses to use influence more than authority to gain educator commitment. Influence is more about engagement, collaboration, and building the trust and commitment to improve rather than using one’s authority and expecting compliance to a new set of expectations. This leadership emphasis was captured vividly in the words of Alfred P. Sloan, the CEO of General Motors in the 1940s and 1950s, “I never give orders. I sell my ideas to my associates if I can. I accept their

ACTIVITY 4 | Psychological Safety

Key Concept: Psychological safety within an organization allows people to brave the discomfort necessary to engage in difficult conversations.

Theme in paper: Psychological Safety

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

⁶ Edmondson, A. (2012). *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer.

judgment if they convince me, as they frequently do, that I am wrong. I prefer to appeal to the intelligence of a man rather than attempt to exercise authority over him."⁷

Trust. At their core, the dynamics of schooling are based on interdependent social exchanges, whether they be amongst adults, amongst students, or amongst adults and students. Relational trust is the oil that facilitates these social exchanges. Bryk and Schneider illuminated the importance of relational trust in school improvement efforts.⁸ Trust impacts the quality of relationships between students and teachers, teachers and administrators, and educators and parents. In turn, the quality of those relationships shapes communications – how open people are to feedback, how willing they are to share their ideas and perspectives, and the

respect and personal regard one feels and is willing to give to others through careful and deep listening. Consequently, trust is a lynchpin for developing a healthy and vital school culture and moving a school forward. Without sufficient trust, improvement efforts often stall. As Bryk & Schneider summarize their work, “Strong relational trust also makes it more likely that reform initiatives will diffuse broadly across the school because trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change. When school professionals trust one another and sense support from parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices.”⁹ Additionally, when we examine turnaround efforts in schools we see an accelerated agenda of change. When those efforts are unsuccessful, it is often not a function of an ineffective strategy but an insufficient investment in building trust within the community.¹⁰

ACTIVITY 5 | Trust

Key Concept: Relational trust is crucial in school improvement efforts because it impacts the quality of relationships amongst all stakeholders in the school.

Theme in paper: Trust

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

ACTIVITY 6 | Creating a Culture

Key Concept: A mutual learning approach requires an individual to look inward rather than outward to own part of the problem.

Theme in paper: Creating a culture of mutual learning (instead of a culture of blame)

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

A culture of mutual learning (instead of a culture of blame). Chris Argyris describes how we all grow up developing ways to approach stressful situations. Often those approaches or mental models involve a set of rules that influence our actions and help us interpret the actions of others.¹¹ When educators and educational leaders tackle difficult issues, particularly around school reform initiatives, those mental models are often in full display. Argyris' work showed that a common approach in the face of stress involves typical behaviors to help us remain in “unilateral control.” Typically, we try to maximize winning and minimize losing, suppress negative

- 7 Sloan, A.P. (1925). *Industrial Digest and Commodities and Finance*, (1925), Vol. 4, p. 16
- 8 Bryk, A.S., and Schneider, B (2002), *Trust in Schools: a core resource for improvement*. N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, New York
- 9 Bryk, Anthony S., and Barbara Schneider. “Trust in schools: a core resource for school reform.” *Educational Leadership*, Mar. 2003, pp. 40-44.
- 10 University of Chicago. “Lack Of Trust Leads To Dysfunctional School Systems.” *ScienceDaily*. *ScienceDaily*, 27 August 2008. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/08/080827164035.htm>
- 11 Argyris, C. “Good Communication That Blocks Learning.” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 1994, pp. 78-85

“Leadership is the ability to guide others without force into a direction or decision that leaves them still feeling empowered and accomplished.”

Lisa Hanson, CEO



feelings, and be as rational as possible. Argyris points out that the purpose of these behaviors is to avoid vulnerability, risk, and embarrassment. Additionally, in order to protect ourselves from failure and the appearance of incompetence, we often resort to blaming others, deflecting any responsibility away from ourselves. Teachers often blame administrators, students, or parents when school initiatives fail. Administrators often blame teachers or parents or central office to explain lack of progress.

This protective set of strategies ultimately arrests learning. Argyris points out that we can learn new strategies and update our mental models. In particular, we can become adept at a mutual learning approach.¹² One of the key aspects of a mutual learning framework is the idea that I might be contributing to the problem. If a group of educators trying to address what appears to be an intractable problem grounded their discussions in the assumption that each of them might be contributing to the problem, defensiveness and blame would be reduced and the potential for learning would increase. Too often, we look outward initially rather than inward and, consequently, we do not own our part of the problem. Imagine if educators addressing a challenging issue such as low attendance or poor growth in mathematical understanding examined a wide range of factors including a discussion of, “How might I (the teachers, the administrators, the support staff) be contributing to this problem?” This is not an easy mindset to achieve and it involves a combination of all three factors: sufficient psychological safety, relational trust, and a mental model of mutual learning. When all of these factors are in place, the environment is rich for learning.

Leadership skills that maximize a leader’s ability to facilitate improvement

While this question continues to spark a variety of responses from the field, we know from our work that the following leadership skills can powerfully and positively impact educator interactions:

Listening in stereo. This is the ability of a leader to listen carefully to both the content of the conversation and how it is expressed. No one would argue with the idea that problem solving requires valid

¹²Schwarz, R. M. (1994). *The skilled facilitator : practical wisdom for developing effective groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

data. Where people diverge is in what counts as valid data. Peter Block in *Flawless Consulting* notes that data encompasses both objective data (facts about situations and events) and personal

data. Block writes that personal data are also “facts,” “but they concern how individuals feel about what is happening to them and around them. If people feel they will not get a fair shake, it is a ‘fact’ that they feel that way, and it is also a ‘fact’ that this belief will have an effect on their behavior. To ignore this kind of ‘fact’ is to throw away data that may be crucial to any problem-solving effort.”¹³ When we discuss listening in stereo we are emphasizing that hearing and acknowledging the feelings embedded in communication are invaluable parts of data collection and trust building. Emotions are data, and overlooking the data communicated through peoples’ affect often produces blind spots that can negatively impact understanding and decision making.

ACTIVITY 7 | Listening in Stereo

Key Concept: Listening in stereo means attuning to a broader array of signals, including both what people say and the way they say it (i.e., non-verbal cues, body language, tone, etc.) in order to better understand people’s perceptions and motivations.

Theme in paper: Listening in Stereo

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

ACTIVITY 8 | Being Curious

Key Concept: A learning stance should be taken on, when approaching conversations where the other person’s perspective is contrary to one’s own values and perspectives, to produce more data about the critical aspects of an issue.

Theme in paper: Being curious in the face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

Being curious in the face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas.

Modern leaders encounter a great deal of conflict and disagreement. Managing these differences in a way that produces insight and better decision-making requires that leaders navigate the turbulence of difficult conversations. Stone, Patton and Heen emphasize the importance of taking a learning stance when approaching conversations where the other person’s perspective is contrary to one’s own values and perspective.¹⁴ A learning stance involves becoming interested in the other’s story. Moving from certainty about one’s own point of view to curiosity about how someone else thinks differently is a powerful skill that can lead

to new insights and understanding. The insights from Stone et al derive from their involvement in complex and challenging negotiations and mediation. Their research showed that curiosity needs to be authentic, i.e. a genuine quest to understand where the other person is coming from. It is not something that simply flows from questions or scripts. Rather, curiosity derives from one’s genuine interest in learning about someone else’s perspective. Authentic curiosity often

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

John F. Kennedy

¹³ Block, Peter. *Flawless Consulting, Enhanced Edition: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used* (p. 18). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
¹⁴ Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations : how to discuss what matters most*. New York, N.Y.: Viking.

produces additional data and the increase in information often surfaces missing and critical aspects of an issue.

Balancing inquiry with advocacy. In his work on the qualities that make companies into learning organizations, MIT's Peter Senge notes that leaders are often too quick to jump from an inquiry stance to one of advocating for an idea or action.¹⁵ When we are inquiring, we are exploring an idea or potential action, gathering information, asking questions, and trying to understand the merits and shortcomings of the idea. When we become advocates, we take on a stake in the outcome and, in doing so, our position becomes more defensive because we have, at least psychologically, taken some ownership of the idea's success or failure. Senge found that advocacy leads to fewer questions, an understatement of risk, and imbalanced judgment of success. He advises that leaders retain their inquiry as long as possible, resist becoming premature advocates, and even when we choose a course of action to remember that we are testing an informed hypothesis and remain open to re-visiting it if it does not go as planned. This will help us to avoid the defensive ownership that comes from too quickly advocating for an idea.

What kinds of decisions can be improved using distributed leadership?

Before describing a more distributed decision-making process, it's important to distinguish between different kinds of decisions leaders are faced with and who it makes sense to involve in them. In 1973 Yale School of Management professor Victor Vroom (we couldn't make that name up!) developed a decision-making framework to consider (a) when leaders should make decisions alone, (b) when they should confer with others, (c) when they should let others make the decision, and (d) when they should engage a group in the decision-making process. Vroom's framework is summarized on the next page.

Vroom's research on decision-making led him to conclude that leaders needed to consider several factors when deciding who to include in a decision, including the time-sensitivity of the decision, the relative importance of the decision, and the need for broader acceptance of the decision. According to these criteria, if decisions are time-sensitive or require knowledge held by the leader alone, then the leader should make the decision. If the decision requires the authority of the leader, but she needs additional expertise, she should

¹⁵ Senge, P. M. (1992). Mental Models. In *Planning Review*, 20(2), 4.9-10.44.

Vroom’s Decision-Making Framework

Type	Decision Approach	Type of Decision	Example
Solo	Leader makes decision alone.	Decision is time-constrained, rule-bound, or relies on unique information that leader has.	When should the state fire alarm inspections occur?
Conferring	Leader makes decision conferring with others.	Participants are told that their opinions and perspectives will help shape the thinking of the leader.	What is the best way to communicate about a school incident?
Delegative	Leader allows others to make the decision.	Decision is important to gain engagement of others, but not central to organization.	Where and when should the school holiday party be held?
Distributed	Leader collaborates with others to make decision together.	Decision requires other perspectives to understand root cause, and others to implement the decision.	Should we do away with grouping levels and if so, how should we respond to the needs of our most confident and least confident students?

seek input from others, while making the final decision. If the decision is relatively unimportant, the leader should delegate the decision to others. If the decision requires both additional expertise and others to implement it, then the leader should involve others in the decision. The work of Vroom is important because it helps us to distinguish between decisions on different kinds of issues.

It is the fourth category of decisions in Vroom's framework, those related to particularly challenging school improvement problems, that we are referring to in this section. How do we know what problems fit into this category and necessitate a more collaborative decision-making process?

Here we are focused on particularly difficult problems that schools face to move the needle on improvement. If these issues were not difficult to address, then they would have already been resolved. One important clue is to ask yourself about the nature of the problem itself: does the problem you want to address have a known solution? Ronald Heifetz of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government makes a useful distinction between two very different types of problems that leaders face: technical problems and adaptive challenges.¹⁶ Technical problems are those for which there are known solutions, however complex they may be, and the task of those faced with a technical challenge is to adopt an already previously puzzled out solution. Adaptive challenges are more difficult in the sense that

¹⁶ Heifetz, R., & Linsky, M. (2017). Leadership on the line, with a new preface: Staying alive through the dangers of change. Harvard Business Press.

they have no readily known solution and therefore cannot just be introduced in a predictable sequence to achieve a desired result.

Thus, the type of challenge posed by the reform represents an important distinction for both leaders and implementers. We follow procedures to implement solutions to technical challenges, and we engage with adaptive challenges to discover solutions that work in particular situations. Technical challenges ask for a particular and sequential response. Adaptive challenges require constructive approaches, as school faculties engage with the challenge and develop their own best ways that fit their capacity and context.

School leaders may also worry about faculty confusion regarding their decisions to be directive with some decisions and collaborative in others. School leaders need to be prepared to explain to others that not all decisions need to be made collaboratively. There are some decisions where there is no time to be consultative, and other decisions which are constrained by existing regulations and therefore there is no latitude in making them. We argue that most decisions about the things that will produce meaningful improvement require a distributed approach in three phases: problem diagnosis, solution design and enactment, and after-action review.

Distributed Leadership as a Companion to Continuous Improvement

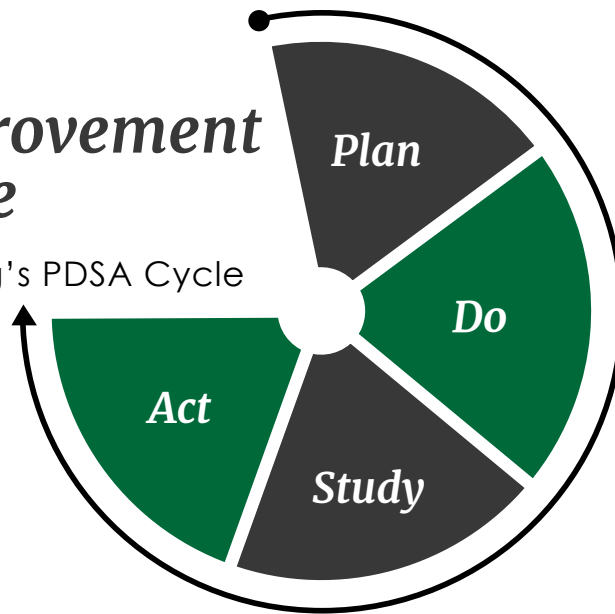
Reform efforts in education swing back and forth between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Currently America is moving away from a period of centralized control (with No Child Left Behind and the Race to Top Initiative) towards greater local autonomy. The Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in December 2015, swings the pendulum decidedly towards local initiation of improvement efforts. Moreover, there is considerable attention, energy, and resources for models of continuous improvement and research-practice partnerships. This is not a new trend, as practitioner inquiry models, ongoing improvement approaches, and organizational learning systems have been initiated and studied for decades. The good news is that many of the lessons accrued from previous efforts are being incorporated into contemporary improvement science models.

“Strive for continuous improvement, instead of perfection.”

Kim Collins

The Improvement Cycle

Deming's PDSA Cycle



Virtually all of these improvement approaches use some kind of cyclical improvement process, consisting of: (a) a careful process of identifying the root cause of a problem; (b) developing a theory of action to address the source of the problem; (c) introducing an intervention based on the theory of action; (d) collecting data on the implementation and impacts of the intervention; (e) analyzing the data to learn the extent to which the intervention was successful in redressing the problem, and; (f) adjusting the theory of action according to the feedback and iterating the process again.

Although there are different models of this cyclical improvement process, perhaps the best known is the Plan-Do-Study-Act process popularized by engineer W. Edward Demings who infused this method of quality control and improvement into the post-World War II Japanese industry revitalization in the 1950s and 1960s. Demings' process was explicitly related to the scientific method of hypothesis, experiment, and evaluation, in which local knowledge is built by developing and testing a series of hypotheses that lead to ongoing improvement.

Our purpose here is not to advocate for any model of improvement, but rather to examine the role of distributed leadership as a companion to continuous improvement. It is our contention that a distributed leadership approach fundamentally enhances the improvement process by drawing attention to the participants in the problem identification process, the ways in which solutions are designed, engagement in the ensuing action, and involvement in the after-action review.

One of the central arguments underlying the distributed leadership perspective as a means for improvement is that engaging a broader set of school faculty members in the improvement process is vital to producing meaningful progress on difficult challenges. This does not simply mean leaders should make decisions and delegate responsibility to others to carry things out. Rather, it means involving a broader array of perspectives during the improvement process to better understand the sources of key challenges, to involve more people in planning strategies for overcoming these challenges, and to include these participants in the subsequent action. We also acknowledge that some improvement designs come as the result of reforms initiated at other levels of system, not just from internally initiated efforts. But we argue that even in those cases where reform is initiated elsewhere, attention to distributed leadership principles will increase the chances of meaningful and sustainable change.

When considering how to address difficult challenges, the improvement science models rightly focus their efforts on the detailed elements of the PDSA cycle. Our contention in this essay is that who is involved – and the way they are engaged in the process – are equally critical components. In this section we focus on the advantages of using a distributed leadership approach with the continuous improvement process. These advantages focus mainly on the diverse perspectives that can enhance the improvement cycle, from problem diagnosis, to solution design, to involvement in the action taken.

Distributed Leadership in Problem Diagnosis¹⁷

Problem diagnosis involves defining the source of an issue or dilemma. The key to successful diagnosis is getting at the root cause to understand the core drivers of the particular problem. This is easier said than done, since getting to the root of a problem means

distinguishing between symptoms of an issue and the underlying cause. What should be done is a direct consequence of how we choose to define a problem. This is because the definition of the problem often shapes the resulting response. This happens all the time. Who hasn't looked back on a decision they have

“If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it.”

Albert Einstein

¹⁷ Spillane, J. P., & Coldren, A. F. (2011). *Diagnosis and design for school improvement*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

made and realized that a faulty assumption fatefully led them to choose one path and not another with major consequences. A good portion of the likelihood of the success of response is related to an appropriate diagnosis of the problem. Further, the consequences of a mis-diagnosis are substantial, because addressing the symptoms of a problem rather than the source will create frustration, waste energy, and fail to alleviate the problem.

Examples of mis-diagnosis are replete in education. One only has to review typical school improvement plans to see abundant examples. As one illustration, it is common to see schools identify gender or racial gaps in student achievement as the problem. Achievement gaps in educations are endemic and are very complex issues to disentangle and meaningfully address. However, the stated strategies in improvement plans are often woefully under-conceptualized to address the difficult adaptive challenge of reducing achievement gaps. Strategies for solving the achievement gap problem often include approaches such as more frequent assessments to inform teachers, more individualized instruction, computer programs that target students skill levels, or after-school tutoring. These are all well-intended initiatives, but will they really chip away at an entrenched problem like the achievement gap? And why are these even the right things to do, as opposed to other equally well-intended strategies? Do they really address the core issues that underlie differences in student performance?

These are the kinds of questions that a distributed leadership approach to problem diagnosis can inform. Interestingly, these are educator-derived solutions for what are perceived to be educational problems. But is this what parents would say contributes to performance differences? Would the school's psychologist or guidance counsellor have a different take on the problem? What about the early grade teachers where achievement gaps start to widen? Are the possible explanations for achievement gaps different in different subject areas? All of these questions point to the advantages of bringing a broader array of people to the table to contribute to the understanding of the source of the problem.

The reason to use a distributed leadership approach in problem diagnosis is that different people will have different conceptions of what is the underlying cause of a problem. A key aspect of strong diagnosis is involving a range of people with different perspectives about the problem – most specifically those who are closest to the source of the problem and those who deal with the consequences of the problem on a regular basis. Those experiencing or affected by the problem, whether they be faculty members, students, and even parents and community members, may have varying interpretations of cause. The advantage to involving a more diverse group of people in discussing the source of the problem is that we will get many

different conceptions of what might be underlying the problem. Involving a diversity of perspectives in the problem definition process will increase the likelihood that a broader range of ideas will be put forward and that people from different backgrounds and different perspectives will be able to push on these ideas and bring out considerations that might not otherwise surface.

Inviting people with different perspectives to take a leadership role in the definition of the problem often produces a very different diagnosis than if this is done by a leader or leadership team which is often more distant from the problem and its consequences on the ground.

“When people are brought together to solve problems in groups, they bring different information, opinions and perspectives.... People who are different from one another in race, gender, and other dimensions bring unique information and experiences to bear on the task at hand.”

Katherine Phillips, Professor of Leadership

The importance of group diversity in decision-making is well grounded in research. A central focus of the work of Katherine Phillips, a professor of leadership at Columbia Business School, has been to compare the quality of decisions of homogenous and diverse groups on different dimensions. Phillips' own studies and her synthesis of decades of research have led her to conclude that diversity matters in multiple ways. Most obviously, diversity of expertise is essential to addressing challenging problems. This is why, in schools, we want to have educators who have multiple kinds of expertise: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of child psychology are all important types of expertise that help in the education of children.

In addressing adaptive challenges, Phillips has found that social diversity matters too. Hers and other research shows that diverse groups (including gender, racial/ethnic, nationality, and class differences) make better decisions than homogeneous ones. As Phillips explains, “When people are brought together to solve problems in groups, they bring different information, opinions and perspectives.... People who are different from one another in race, gender, and other dimensions bring unique information and

experiences to bear on the task at hand.”¹⁸ Interestingly, Phillips has also found that diverse groups are less confident in their decisions than are groups that are more similar to each other.

ACTIVITY 9 | Diagnosis, Design, and Action Review

Key Concept: Distributed leadership enhances continuous improvement by drawing attention to the participants in the problem identification process, the way in which solutions are designed, engagement in the ensuing action, and involvement in after-action review.

Theme in paper: Distributed leadership as a companion to continuous improvement

[Click here](#), to view activity

Using a model of distributed leadership to bring together people from different backgrounds, with different experiences, expertise, and perspectives, should be actively sought out. The experiences offered by front-line educators can illuminate the dynamics of what is supporting or limiting

learning and provide opportunities to explore root causes and underlying conditions that are at the core of either a problem, an impediment to growth, or a desired improvement. If, for example, a high school principal wanted to engage the faculty in increasing minority student participation in honors classes, seeking out and listening carefully to the perspectives of those teaching a range of honors classes as well as those teaching non-honors classes would inform what teachers perceive as necessary prerequisites to success, as well what are seen as the qualities of high achievement. Involving students in both types of classes might also give insights into the barriers from both vantage points. This process might also surface considerations about the relationship of expectations to student achievement, the influence of unconscious or hidden biases, the role of mindset on learning, and the impact of signals on student motivation. By including a range of perspectives, and creating the conditions and norms that allow for the exchange of multiple and differing perspectives from a wide group of constituencies, this approach would create the most accurate portrait of the underlying factors contributing to limited participation of certain groups of students in honors courses. While this is a more involved process, it is much more likely to produce a meaningful analysis of the problem.

Finally, it should be noted that involving more people in a process also brings challenges for the formal leaders who are developing the process for such a conversation to take place. The risks associated with opening up the process will be addressed in section seven.

Distributed Leadership in Solution Design and Enactment

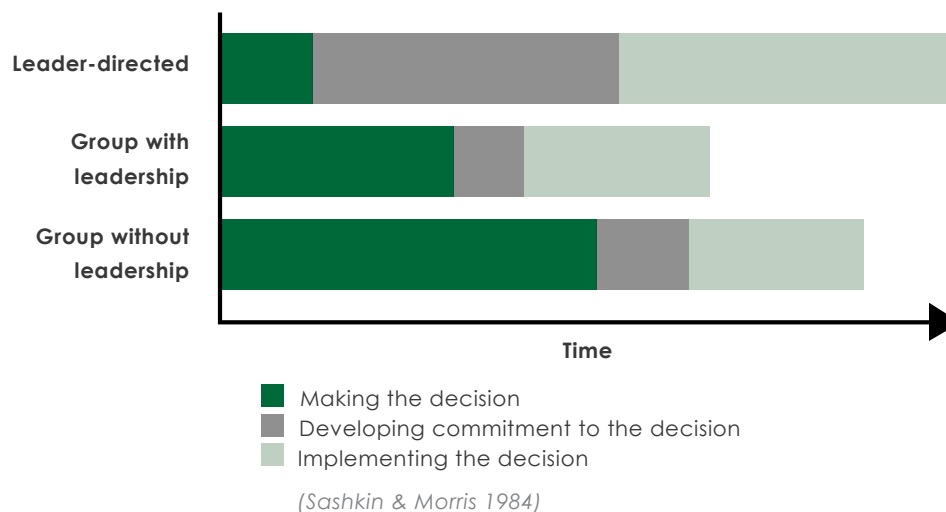
The use of distributed leadership shouldn't stop at the problem diagnosis stage, because many of the same people involved in the diagnosis process will also likely be those playing leading roles in

¹⁸ Phillips, K. W. (2014). How diversity makes us smarter. *Scientific American*, 311(4), 43-47.

the solution design and enactment. There are at least three reasons that many of the same people involved in the problem diagnosis should also take leadership roles in the solution design. First, as part of the diagnosis process, these folks understand the problem more intimately. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, many of these are probably going to be these same people whose commitment will be needed to address the problem. Third, and more pragmatically, involving those in the solution design who will be required to enact the decision is simply more efficient.

Consider the common situation in schools where change is introduced from outside and school faculty are expected to implement the change. They don't know exactly why the change was introduced or the rationale behind this particular reform. Further, it may conflict with current practices which have their own logic behind them. As psychologist Robert Evans argues, people are generally conservative when it comes to change, and we cling to the patterns represented by our routines. When we are asked to change, we often are not adequately provided with the rationale of why it is important and beneficial to change before we are told what we are supposed to change.¹⁹ A distributed leadership approach to diagnosis and design helps to alleviate this problem by involving those who are expected to implement an approach in the problem definition and solution strategizing. Involving the solution implementers in the process gives them more ownership of the reform implementation as they engage with its implications for their particular context. Engagement brings with it more ownership and commitment, and commitment deepens implementation.

Decision Time Line for Individual and Group Decision-making



¹⁹ Evans, R. (1996). *The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Research indicates that a distributed leadership approach leads to more effectual implementation of decisions in cases where a group is relied on to enact the decision. When considering decision efficiency, Sashkin & Morris (1984) distinguished between the time it takes for individuals and groups to make decisions and the time it takes to enact the decisions. They argued that it is much more efficient for individual leaders to make decisions relative to groups. But this does not consider the time it takes to actually implement the decision. While it is always more efficient for leaders to make decisions alone, they still must gain the commitment of others to implement the decision. When combining the time it takes to explain a decision and gain the commitment of others to implement a decision, individual decision-making actually takes longer than group decision-making. While leaders can make decisions quickly, they still must gain the commitment of others before implementing the decision.

SCENARIO

How Distributed Leadership Can Lead to Different Decisions

Mr. Devers has been the principal of Harmon High School for the past 12 years. The school has about 1,200 students and a faculty of 45 teachers as well as aides and specialists. About 80 percent of Harmon's faculty are white, and the majority have more experience at the school than Mr. Devers. The younger teachers are more diverse, reflecting the community's changing demographics.

Over the last decade the town of Harmon has undergone a population shift. The two major employers in Harmon – tool-and-die manufacturers making machine and cutting tools for the auto and aerospace industries – have downsized and specialized their product lines in recent years, as much of their old business was outsourced to overseas competitors with cheaper costs. Their new business is more specialized, complex, and customized.

As a consequence, the town of Harmon has also undergone a demographic transition. The jobs at the plants have increasingly required higher and more sophisticated skills, regardless of whether the jobs were in the engineering divisions or on the shop floor. A cadre of engineers and mechanical specialists had moved to town to guide the companies' shift towards more custom high-end equipment. The workers at the plants have also transitioned, as stable well-paying jobs at the factories became more uncertain and second-generation Latino populations moved into town.

The changes in the local population have influenced Harmon High as well. The student population is about a third white, 40% Latinx, and 20% black. About 50 percent of the students are eligible for lunch assistance. Mr. Devers finds that the school is becoming increasingly segregated by college preparatory and vocational tracks that generally mapped onto the children of the two factories' working populations. Mr. Devers wants to figure out ways to better prepare more students to take college preparatory classes and to encourage even those students who are choosing the vocational offerings to take more college preparatory courses.

Mr. Devers considers different approaches to engaging with the problem. Here are three scenarios of what he might do and the changes that result.

SCENARIO 1

Mr. Devers brings the issue to the school's leadership team, which is made up of himself and five faculty members: the school's assistant principal and the chairs of the four subject matter departments. Each have been at the school for at least eight years and have a shared sense of the way the school operates. The discussions go fairly smooth, and the leadership team's recommendations are to modify the 9th grade courses to help students better prepare for the college prep courses in grades 10-12. They also decide to reach out to the two feeder middle schools to make sure they are adequately preparing students for the college preparatory track in high school.

SCENARIO 2

Mr. Devers puts together a committee made up of teachers and high school seniors from both the college preparatory and vocational tracks. He makes sure to include two of the younger teachers on the committee, including Ms. Olivera, a third-year math teacher who teaches in both tracks and is an advocate for preparing more Latinx students to succeed in college prep courses. The conversations of the committee are sometimes contentious, particularly amongst the teachers from the different tracks. There are times when Mr. Devers felt ill-prepared to keep frustrations from boiling over. The students are generally deferential to their teachers, and only seem to voice their views when Mr. Devers asks

them specific questions. The group also proposes to focus on restructuring the 9th grade courses but emphasize an outreach campaign to middle-school and 9th- and 10th-grade parents to make them aware of college options and what students will need to be prepared for them.

SCENARIO 3

Mr. Devers puts together a committee that is made up of teachers, parents, and representatives of the two tool-and-die companies. The parents are relatively quiet in the meetings and Mr. Devers has to make special efforts to get them to voice their thoughts. The committee proposes to connect the school to a range of community and social groups to spread the importance of parental support for families hoping that their children will attend college and what it takes to make it happen. The two companies' representatives offer to help design classes in the vocational track to connect students to the skills they will need in the increasingly sophisticated manufacturing world.

- ▶ *What do you notice about these three scenarios?*
- ▶ *What are the consequences of different distributed leadership approaches in problem diagnosis and solution design?*
- ▶ *Based on their solution designs, how do you think the three groups diagnosed the problem?*

Distributed Leadership in After-Action Review

Action review links the phases of the improvement process together because it is both the end of the cycle and the start of the next. Difficult problems are not simple and easily resolved, and therefore it is possible, even likely, that the first attempts at addressing them do not work. Therefore, leaders need to plan for some kind of stock-taking and review of how the designed solution response is actually playing out. Again, like the diagnosis and design processes, involving multiple relevant actors in the after-action review will lead to more perspectives and interpretations of what went well and what went awry, and produce a more thoughtful reflection of the process. In that way, leadership is distributed and understood as occurring between and among educators, not simply as a series of actions taken by the designated leader. Progress is never guaranteed and there are a host of ways that distributing leadership can miss the target of improvement. However, despite these risks, the probability of crafting durable improvements using distributed leadership is high.

“Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have not meaning.”

Benjamin Franklin

Managing the Risks of Using Distributed Leadership for Improvement

While there are clear benefits to involving a broader set of faculty members in the process of diagnosing the impediments to school improvement, the design of collaborative approaches to overcoming these impediments, and the implementation process, there are also consequences of this more collaborative process. While tapping into the expertise and leadership of the faculty has significant upsides when it comes to improvement efforts, there are four challenges presented by this approach:

The discomfort of public disagreement

Seeking out the diverse perspectives from a wide variety of constituencies, while exciting for what such an approach can produce in the form of rich and varied ideas, also creates conflict.

ACTIVITY 10 | Discomfort of Public Disagreement

Key Concept: Curiosity and collaboration should be chosen when the discomfort of public disagreement arises in an organization.

Theme in paper: Discomfort of public disagreement

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

Rarely do people agree when it comes to unpacking complex educational issues. Disagreements abound about how to approach, for example, literacy instruction, student discipline, or effective parent engagement. And while some experience open disagreements as a natural and

normal part of a healthy exchange, others view disagreements as inappropriate and a form of disrespect. Consequently, there is often discomfort when disagreements emerge. People react to this discomfort in a variety of ways including avoidance, accommodation, or competition.²⁰ Curiosity and collaboration are unfortunately not the most consistent choices that people make when confronted with opposing ideas, but these approaches often provide a means to bridge the divide that emerges when values, ideas, and perspectives clash.

The challenge of addressing non-discussables

Addressing school issues openly and transparently can bump into non-discussables.²¹ Roland Barth writes, "Non-discussables are subjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently

ACTIVITY 11 | Challenge of Addressing Non-discussables

Key Concept: In order to clarify underlying beliefs and/or misconceptions, relevant sensitive subjects should be addressed out in the open.

Theme in paper: Challenge of addressing non-discussables

✔ [Click here](#), to view activity

but are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations take place only in the parking lot, the rest rooms, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home. Fear abounds that open discussion of these incendiary issues at a faculty meeting, for example—will cause a meltdown."²² Issues that pertain

to racial relationships or the poor performance of a leader or a department are examples of potential non-discussables. A common non-discussable is the unwillingness of staff and the administration to critique their own behavior and motivation and discuss their contributions to a particular issue.²³ Typically, faculty might be comfortable critiquing leadership but leave their own behaviors

20 Anderson, D.L. (2017). *Cases and Exercises in Organization Development & Change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

21 Barth, R. (2002). *The Culture Builder*. *Educational Leadership*, Volume 59 (8). Pages 6-11.

22 Ibid

23 Argyris, C. *Good Communication That Blocks Learning*, HBR, July-August 1994, p.85

unexamined. Leaders, too, often leave their own contributions out of the discussion of a problem for fear of appearing weak. Leaders can also be leery about directly raising concerns about faculty performance and attitudes. In attempt to keep morale positive, leaders may choose to communicate indirectly or stay silent about their concerns related to faculty performance. These limited and filtered exchanges between educators and building leaders, while capable of producing “middling commitment and morale”²⁴ and, in some cases, reasonable productivity, fall short of the excellence and higher standards that many educators seek.

Navigating power differentials

Adding to the complexity that emerges from a conversation involving philosophical differences and diverse values, are the communication challenges that stem from power differentials. “Can I be forthright

and say what I am really thinking to the principal who supervises and evaluates me?”

Besides the traditional boundary lines that make open and honest communication difficult, there are multiple, less visible but

challenging divisions that occur around status. Can the novice teacher challenge the ideas of a veteran teacher? Can a

teaching assistant disagree with her teacher

colleague? These divisions also occur in many schools around departments and entire groups. Can a special educator openly

disagree with the approach of a regular classroom teacher without hearing a comment like, “She has no idea of what it is like to teach a classroom full of students when she has only 5 students at a time.”

Addressing power issues that create boundary lines blocking open communication requires courageous and strategic leadership.

For many of us, it requires unlearning what we have observed and adhered to throughout our work lives. Alfred P. Sloan once again

models this when he suggests, “Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. Then, I propose we

postpone further discussion of this matter until the next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement, and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.”²⁵

ACTIVITY 12 | Navigating Power Differentials

Key Concept: Power issues that create boundaries need to be addressed so that open communication can occur.

Theme in paper: Navigating Power Differentials

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

Making sense of emotions

The conflict and discomfort that emerges from these disagreements often brings out difficult emotions to manage. Underlying frustration,

²⁴ Ibid, p.85

²⁵ Sloan, A.P. quoted in: “Alfred Sloan, Guru,” economist.com, Jan. 30, 2009.

ACTIVITY 13 | Making Sense of Emotion

Key Concept: Managing and paying attention to the interactions that occur amongst colleagues, anticipating disagreements, and understanding the emotions people can lead to potential breakthroughs.

Theme in paper: Making sense of emotion

✓ [Click here](#), to view activity

anger, and annoyance often get expressed as sarcasm, personal attacks, or silence, none of which move the conversation forward. Understanding the emotions expressed at meetings is no small challenge. People

express their feelings differently. Some do so directly; others indirectly. Indirect expressions can be both verbal and nonverbal. This range of expression makes navigating and understanding emotions complicated. It is for these reasons that engaging a staff to present their perspectives on a topic, issue, or problem – while appearing attractive – is often a choice viewed by educational leaders as risky and challenging. Despite the risks, however, moving forward in this area provides leaders with access to valid data – data related to the “facts” of how individuals feel about what is happening to them and around them(Block, p.18).²⁶

In sum, seeking the perspectives of the staff and creating a culture that values open and honest self-examination is an essential aspect of our model of distributed leadership. However, simply reaching out for the ideas and perspectives of educators will not generate creative solutions. Often what it creates is dissonance and a tendency to avoid critical self-examination. Learning to manage and pay attention to the interactions that occur, anticipating disagreements, and fully exploring the thoughts and feelings of constituents, will generate more ideas, deeper commitment, and potential breakthroughs than approaches that avoid the messiness of conflict.

Meaningful and sustainable school improvement with distributed leadership

The legendary Harvard Business School professor Chris Argyris, who studied patterns of organizational learning for over 50 years, coined the distinction between single loop and double loop organizational learning. Single loop learning, Argyris observed, was the most common type of organizational response to a challenge, which involved incremental adjustments in response to a problem. Argyris wrote that single loop learning, under the best of conditions, can help organizations make small improvements, but would not generate great leaps of progress. Double loop learning is much more difficult. It requires people to question the underlying assumptions about organizational processes. But double loop learning was the most likely

²⁶ Block, P. (2011). *Flawless Consulting*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

way to shift the paradigm to produce breakthroughs in thinking. In his work with organizations, Argyris saw relatively few examples of double loop learning, which he concluded was mostly due to the protective behaviors and defensive routines that organizations adopted and which impeded the frank questioning of underlying beliefs that were necessary to achieve significant improvements. We see the tackling of difficult educational challenges using distributed leadership as a way of creating the conditions for double loop learning.

Efforts to achieve meaningful school improvement require two essential ingredients. The first ingredient is an improvement approach that provides a disciplined process to iteratively develop and test hypotheses to identify root causes and then design potential strategies to overcome challenges that impede progress. The second ingredient is to mobilize and engage the people who are the engine of this work. Distributed leadership provides a way of organizing the human capital companion to continuous improvement methods as a means of achieving transformational school improvement.

Distributed leadership offers several integral advantages for educational leaders in their school improvement efforts. First, the distributed leadership perspective focuses attention onto leadership practice, which occurs in the interactions of people within their situation, rather than solely on the actions of individual leaders. Moving attention from individual actions to multi-actor interactions changes our understanding of the way decision-making occurs.

Second, particularly when addressing adaptive challenges, distributed leadership encourages the involvement of a diverse set of people with different expertise, perspectives, and backgrounds to grapple with the root causes of a problem. This multi-perspective approach increases the likelihood that the group will arrive at a more incisive diagnosis of the problem. Since mis-diagnosis can lead to weak or misguided solutions, understanding the underlying nature of a problem is particularly important. And it is exactly because of the diversity of peoples' experiences and perspectives that innovative solutions become more visible.

Third, since commitment to the plan of response is essential, engaging those who are likely to be central to implementation is also critical. This involvement stretches across all the multiple stages of the continuous improvement process.

Nevertheless, embracing this process can be daunting for leaders since there are risks associated with the more inclusive process that distributed leadership entails. As we've described in the paper, some of the potential risks include challenges to the authority of leaders, the discomfort of disagreeing openly with colleagues and superiors, the possible surfacing of uncomfortable and awkward feelings and

issues, and managing one's own emotions and the emotions of others who bring passion and conviction to their work. This is akin to the defensiveness that Argyris thought got in the way of double loop learning. In polite circumstances, these are all things to be avoided. But this is the crux of the issue – because these are the very circumstances where the truly meaningful issues come to the surface.

This presents school leaders with a double-edged dilemma. One edge promises the candid interactions amongst stakeholders that produce the insights necessary to understand and make progress on difficult problems that impede school improvement. On the other edge sits the discomfort, awkwardness, and painful emotions that may surface when discussing sensitive issues. Yet these two things go hand in hand. It is exactly at this fulcrum where important insights emerge. We learn when we are just outside our comfort zone.

The way out of this dilemma requires that leaders create the conditions and develop the skills to manage the more contentious discussions that are necessary to hash out, enact, and revise meaningful improvement plans. School leaders and faculty don't have a lot of training or experience operating in the uncomfortable space of disagreement that produces double loop learning. The key idea that we have offered on how to create the foundation for this work is to establish a psychologically safe space solidified by trust and embedded in a culture of mutual learning. However, psychological safety doesn't mean, providing comfort, but rather it means making people more comfortable with discomfort. Breakthroughs come in such a crucible. People have to be willing to feel comfortable enough with the discomfort of disagreement, manage the associated emotions that often emerge in such an arena, and not shy away from the challenging conversations. This work also requires having faith that hanging in there will get you to a better place. Skilled leaders recognize this and seek to enter and encourage these kinds of conversations because this is where the real learning comes that fuels meaningful and sustainable improvement.





[Click here](#), to read report section

ACTIVITY 1 | The Work of School Leaders

Key Concept: School leadership activity can be organized into three sets of functions: putting out fires, maintaining the organization, and engaging in reform activities.

Theme in paper: The Work of School Leaders

Activities

1. **Reflect** on the last week at your school.
2. **List** the work you completed in each of the three categories.

Putting Out Fires

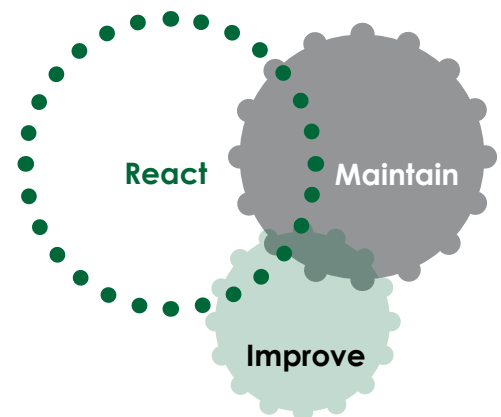
Maintaining the Organization

Engaging in Reform Activities

Draw a Venn Diagram of your school estimating your schools' attention to putting out fires, maintaining the organizations and engaging in improvements.

My School

Sample School



Discussion Questions

Q1: Do you see there any patterns within your actions on putting out fires that you described in question 2?

Q2: Are there any ways you might be more proactive in responding to urgent issues?

Q3: Look at the regular activities (maintaining the organization) you wrote in question 2. What was the original purpose of each of the activities?

Q4: Do the activities still serve a control purpose in your current situation? Might they be modified to be more effective?



[Click here, to read report section](#)

ACTIVITY 2 | The DL Perspective

Key Concept: Formal titles and positions may not align with the influence that individuals have.

Theme in paper: The DL Perspective - Who are the leaders of a school from the DL Perspective

The purpose of this exercise is to distinguish between the organizational structure of schooling and professional and social relationships.

1) **Think about the following topics within the context of your school**

- a. Improving Math Instruction
- b. Addressing Student Discipline Infractions
- c. Improving teachers' use of instructional technology (optional)

2) **Put yourself in the shoes of the following people**

- a. The Principal
- b. An Instructional Coach
- c. A Teacher of Mathematics

3) For each of three staff positions listed (principal, instructional coach, teacher) identify 3 of the people in your school who you would go to if you sought advice about each of the topics listed in question 1.

a) Improving Math Instruction

Role	Person 1 / Title	Person 2 / Title	Person 3 / Title
The Principal			
An Instructional Coach			
A Teacher of Math-ematics			

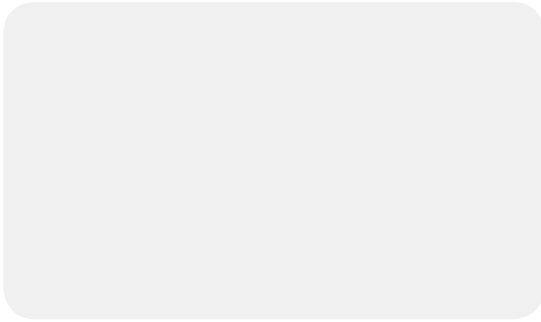
b) Addressing Student Discipline Infractions

Role	Person 1 / Title	Person 2 / Title	Person 3 / Title
The Principal			
An Instructional Coach			
A Teacher of Math-ematics			

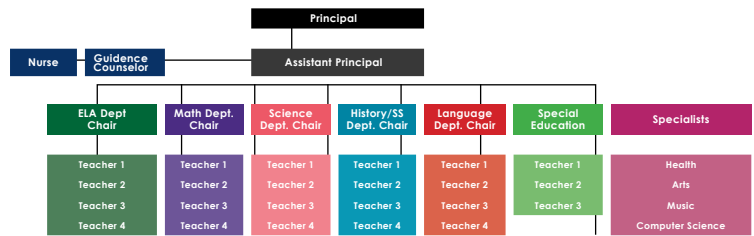
c) Improving teachers' use of instructional technology (optional)

Role	Person 1 / Title	Person 2 / Title	Person 3 / Title
The Principal			
An Instructional Coach			
A Teacher of Math-ematics			

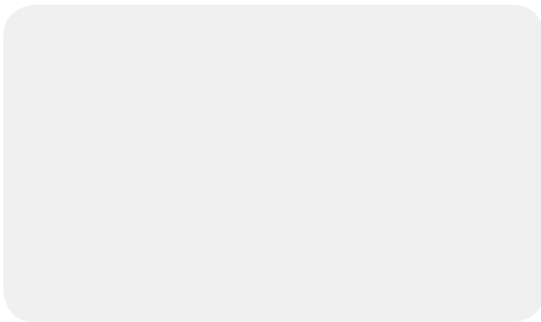
4) Thinking about the organizational chart of your school, what do you notice about the people in each of the three networks. Draw an organizational chart of your school and place the people you've chosen on an organizational chart



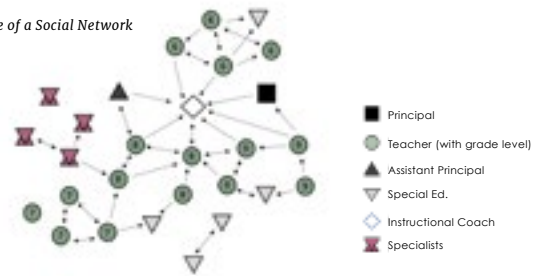
Example of School Organization Chart



5) Now think about the social network of the school, what do you notice about the people in each of the three networks. Draw a social network map of your school and place the people you've chosen on a social network



Example of a Social Network



6) What's similar and different of having social network perspective vs organizational structure perspective?

7) What do these two perspectives of leadership highlight and/or obscure?

These are some of the things you might discuss:

- How is influence very different than positional/formal authority?
- Each topic (math, discipline, technology) may have a different set of identified leaders. Why do you think this is so?
- What is the value of leadership activity by people without formal leadership positions?
- How might knowing more about the broader array of leadership activity in your school influence your actions as a formal leader?

ACTIVITY 3 | Interactions

Key Concept: Distributed leadership practice encourages leaders to attend not just to action, but interactions which produce a fuller picture on the practice of school leadership.



Theme in paper: Interactions

[Click here](#), to read report section

Video Resource

This is a video of dysfunctional school meeting. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf9Bhz8lYac>



Part 1: This is an example of a dysfunctional meeting.

Activity

- 1) Get a partner
- 2) As you watch the video linked above, one partner should focus on the actions of the facilitator (woman w/glasses at the head of the table). The other partner should focus on the interactions amongst other members and between the members and the facilitator.
- 3) Based on your focus, write down your observation as the video plays in the space provided below.

4) Compare your observations with your partner. Note any commonalities and or differences.

These are some of the things you might discuss:

- The facilitator led the meeting with some degree of success, but it was evident that the meeting was disrupted by the interactions of the two men sitting on the right side of her.
- The facilitator introduced the technology grant, but the individuals on the left lost focus and followed the lead of Paul (the man in the blue).
- How effective was the facilitator?
- What are some things that she might have done differently to better lead the meeting?
- How would you name the different distractions that the meeting participants engaged in?
- How might you redirect those distractions?
- How does focusing on participant interactions change your conceptions and insights about the meeting?

ACTIVITY 4 | Psychological Safety

Key Concept: Psychological safety within an organization allows people to brave the discomfort necessary to engage in difficult conversations.



Theme in paper: Psychological Safety

[Click here](#), to read report section

Video Resource

This is an 11 minute TEDx talk that Amy Edmondson gives on Psychological Safety.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8>



Edmondson, Amy (2019). Psychological Safety. TEDx Talks.

Activity

Visit this module on assessing psychological safety of your team.

<https://www.grovo.com/lessons/assess-the-psychological-safety-of-your-team>

TEWork

How to foster Psychological Safety on your teams

Demonstrate engagement

- Be present and focus on the conversation (e.g., close your laptop during meetings)
- Ask questions with the intention of learning from your teammates
- Offer input, be interactive, and show you're listening
- Respond verbally to show engagement ("That makes sense. Tell us more.")
- Be aware of your body language, make sure to lean towards or face the person speaking
- Make eye contact to show connection and active listening

Show understanding

- Recap what's been said to confirm mutual understanding/alignment (e.g., "What I heard you say is...", then acknowledge areas of agreement, disagreement, and be open to questions within the group)
- Validate comments verbally ("I understand," "I see what you're saying.")
- Avoid placing blame ("Why did you do that?") and focus on solutions ("How can we work toward making sure this goes more smoothly next time?", "What can we do together to make a game plan for next time?")
- Think about your facial expressions: are they unintentionally negative (a scowl or grimace)?
- nod your head to demonstrate understanding during conversations/meetings

Be inclusive in interpersonal settings

- Share information about your personal work style and preferences, encourage teammates to do the same
- Be available and approachable to teammates (e.g., make time for ad hoc 1:1 conversations, feedback sessions, career coaching)
- Clearly communicate the purpose of ad hoc meetings (scheduled outside normal 1:1/team meetings)
- Express gratitude for contributions from the team
- Step in if team members talk negatively about another team member
- Have open body posture (e.g., face all team members, don't turn your back to part of the group)
- Build rapport (e.g., talk with your teammates about their lives outside of work)

Be inclusive in decision-making

- Solicit input, opinions, and feedback from your teammates
- Don't interrupt or allow interruptions (e.g., step in when someone is interrupted and ensure they're able to hear)
- Explain the reasoning behind your decisions (live or via email, walk team through how you arrived at a decision)
- Acknowledge input from others (e.g., highlight when team members were contributors to a success or decision)

Show confidence and conviction without appearing inflexible

- Manage team discussions (e.g., don't allow side conversations in team meetings, make sure conflict isn't personal)
- Use a voice that is clear and audible in a team setting
- Support and represent the team (e.g., share team's work with senior leadership, give credit to teammates)
- Invite the team to challenge your perspective and push back
- Model vulnerability, share your personal perspective on work and failures with your teammates
- Encourage teammates to take risks, and demonstrate risk-taking in your own work

Sources

- Edmondson and Lei (2014). "Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct," Annual Review Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior
- Edmondson (1996). "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams." Administrative Science Quarterly June 1996.
- Carman, Carol Kinsey Ph.D. "The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help-or Hurt-How You Lead." Jossey-Bass Publishing, April 2011.

Leadership Behaviors for Cultivating Psychological Safety

To develop a high-performance, psychologically safe environment for teaming and learning do the following:

Action	Definition
Be accessible and approachable	Leaders encourage team members to learn together by being accessible and personally involved
Acknowledge the limits of current knowledge	When leaders admit that they don't know something, their genuine display of humility encourages other team members to follow suit.
Be willing to display fallibility	To create psychological safety, team leaders must demonstrate a tolerance of failure by acknowledging their own fallibility
Invite participation	When people believe their leaders value their input, they're more engaged and responsive.
Highlight failures as learning opportunities	Instead of punishing people for well-intentioned risks that backfire, leaders encourage team members to embrace error and deal with failure in a productive manner.
Use direct language	Using direct, actionable language instigates the type of straightforward, blunt discussion that enables learning.
Set boundaries	When leaders are as clear as possible about what is acceptable, people feel more psychologically safe than when boundaries are vague or unpredictable.
Hold people accountable for transgressions	When people cross boundaries set in advance and fail to perform up to set standards leaders must hold them accountable in a fair and consistent way.

Source: Edmondson, Amy. (2012). Teaming- How Organizations, Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy. Pg. 139.

Sign That a Workplace is Psychologically Safe

A leader or manager knows that psychological safety is present when:

People on a team say such things as:

- "We all respect each other."
- "When something bugs me, we're able to confront each other"
- "Everyone in our group takes responsibility for what we do."
- "I don't have to wear a mask at work. I can be myself."

People talk about mistakes and problems, not just successes

The workplace appears to be conducive to humor and laughter.

Source: Edmondson, Amy. (2012). Teaming- How Organizations, Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy. Pg. 141.

ACTIVITY 5 | Trust

Key Concept: Relational trust is crucial in school improvement efforts because it impacts the quality of relationships amongst all stakeholders in the school.



Theme in paper: Trust

[Click here](#) to read report section

Readings

This is an article from Washington Post that discusses building trust at work.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/career-coach-how-to-build-trust-at-work/2014/04/11/bc2cb6ec-c0be-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1365ffb76574

This is the 7 components of relational trust.

[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar18/vol75/num06/What's-\(Relational\)-Trust-Have-to-Do-with-It%C2%A2.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar18/vol75/num06/What's-(Relational)-Trust-Have-to-Do-with-It%C2%A2.aspx)

Trust in Schools – An article written by Bryk and Schneider describing trust in schools.

Videos

This is a video of building relational trust in a school done by Empowerment Education.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8YG-GsurdI>

Activities

This is a powerpoint that includes different activities regarding relational trust based on the Bryk & Schneider study. This was used for a professional development session for the Center For Courage & Renewal.

<https://events.ksde.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gc7vBbSr1Ak%3D&tabid=863&mid=2173>

ACTIVITY6 | Creating a culture

Key Concept: A mutual learning approach requires an individual to look inward rather than outward to own part of the problem.



Theme in paper: Creating a culture of mutual learning (instead of a culture of blame)

[Click here](#), to read report section

Readings

An article from the Harvard Business Review that discusses steps on how to move away from a culture of blame in the organization.

<https://hbr.org/2010/05/how-to-stop-the-blame-game>

An article that contains steps on how to move away from a culture of blame.

<https://www.techwell.com/techwell-insights/2013/06/what-do-about-workplace-culture-blame>

An article that discusses how mutual learning happened in a classroom of 4th graders.

<https://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/mutual-learning-through-conversation>

Videos



An 18-minute TEDx talk about the new culture of learning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM80GXlyX0U>

Activities

A version of the blame game.

https://www.researchpress.com/sites/default/files/books/addContent/6540-sample_0.pdf

Another version of the blame game.

https://zetataualpha.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/03-Blame-Game_Inabit.pdf

ACTIVITY 7 | Listening in Stereo

Key Concept: Listening in stereo means attuning to a broader array of signals, including both what people say and the way they say it (i.e., non-verbal cues, body language, tone, etc.) in order to better understand people's perceptions and motivations.



Theme in paper: Listening in Stereo

[Click here](#), to read report section

Readings

This article discusses how to read better body language and includes a video.
https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/Body_Language.htm

Activities

This is a variety of lesson plans with different communication games and activities geared towards children.
<http://www.sdcda.org/office/girlsonlytoolkit/toolkit/got-05-communication.pdf>

This includes different activities that will improve communication skills.
<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/team-building-communication.htm>

ACTIVITY 8 | Being curious in the face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas

Key Concept: A learning stance should be taken on, when approaching conversations where the other person's perspective is contrary to one's own values and perspectives, to produce more data about the critical aspects of an issue.



Theme in paper: Being curious in the face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas

[Click here, to read report section](#)

Readings

This is a short article by the Harvard Business Review that summarizes Stone, Patton and Heen, the authors of *Difficult Conversation*. <https://hbr.org/2009/03/7-tips-for-difficult-conversat>

This article contains a high level summary of the *Difficult Conversations* book from Stone, Patton and Heen and has an activity attached. <https://www.fscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Difficult-Conversations-Summary.pdf>

Series of questions you might ask in face of criticism and wrong sounding ideas (*Difficult Conversations*)

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- What information might you have that I don't?
- How do you see it differently?
- What impact have my actions had on you?
- Can you say a little more about why you think this is my fault?
- Were you reacting to something I did?
- How are you feeling about all of this?
- Say more about why this is important to you?

Source: Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations : how to discuss what matters most*. New York, N.Y.: Viking.

ACTIVITY 9 | DL as a companion to continuous improvement

Key Concept: Distributed leadership enhances continuous improvement by drawing attention to the participants in the problem identification process, the way in which solutions are designed, engagement in the ensuing action, and involvement in after-action review.



Theme in paper: Distributed leadership as a companion to continuous improvement

[Click here, to read report section](#)

Purpose

In Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky's *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership – Tools and Tactics for Changing your Organization and The World*, they include an exercise that helps people understand multiple perspectives as part of the diagnosis process.

For each of the stakeholders, you need to identify:

- Relationship to the Issue- How will they be affected by resolution of the challenge?
- Preferred Outcome- What would they like to see come out of a resolution of the issue?
- Noblest Values – What are the commitments and beliefs guiding the behaviors and decision-making processes?
- Loyalties- What obligations does the person have to people outside his or her immediate group (such as long-standing customer or supplier relationships)?
- Potential Losses– What does the person fear losing (status, resources, a positive self-image) if things should change? Other examples may include: identity, competence, comfort, security, reputation, time, money, power, control, status, resources, independence, righteousness, job, life

Activity

1. The following scenario gives you practice on identifying multiple perspectives.

Scenario: There are three high schools in an urban-fringe district. Although the high schools predominantly get their student from district feeder patterns, higher-performing students seek to attend the high school on west side of the city.

The high school on the east side of the city is working on trying to get more minority students enrolled in their Advanced Placement (AP) courses, especially their AP Mathematics and Science courses. This will prepare their students to be more competitive in their college applications. There are concerns from current AP teachers, like the AP Mathematics teacher, about the number of AP courses currently held. Some of the faculty, like a regular mathematics teacher, are concerned about their preparation to teach AP courses. Additionally, some faculty, like the College and Career counselor, are worried about whether the students can succeed in these classes.

Fill out the chart below as each stakeholder in the scenario:

Stakeholder (individual or group)	Relationship to the issue?	Preferred Out-come?	Noblest Values?	Loyalties?	Potential Loss-es?
AP Mathematics Teacher					
Regular Mathematics Teacher					
College and Career Counselor					
Minority Student					

Source: Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., Linsky, M., (2009). The Practice of Adaptive Leadership - Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World.

2. The following scenario gives you practice on identifying multiple perspectives.

Scenario: You are a 3rd grade teacher. A student is consistently off-task. You remind the student and enforce the school's stated discipline consequence. The student continues to be off task. You remind the student a 2nd time and enforce the next level of discipline consequence. The student continues her behavior. You remind the student a 3rd time, at which point, the discipline consequence is to send her to the Assistant Principal's office. The Assistant Principal follows the school-wide discipline policy and assigns her to after-school detention. The Assistant Principal informs you and the student's mother about the final consequence.

Fill out the chart below as each stakeholder in the scenario:

Stakeholder (individual or group)	Relationship to the issue?	Preferred Out-come?	Noblest Values?	Loyalties?	Potential Loss-es?
3rd Grade Reading Teacher					
Assistant Principal					
Mother of Student					

Source: Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., Linsky, M., (2009). The Practice of Adaptive Leadership - Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World.

ACTIVITY 10 | Discomfort of public disagreement

Key Concept: Curiosity and collaboration should be chosen when the discomfort of public disagreement arises in an organization.



Theme in paper: Discomfort of public disagreement

[Click here, to read report section](#)

Readings

This is an article by the Harvard Business Review that discusses how leaders can use alliances to reap the benefits of conflicts. <https://hbr.org/2016/12/the-right-kind-of-conflict-leads-to-better-products>

This is an article that discusses using emotional intelligence and how to handle hot topics when they arise in an organization. <https://www.kornferry.com/institute/work-conflict-management-emotional-intelligence>

Activity

Read the scenario listed below and discuss the following questions.

Scenario: Are You Ready?

Just before Doug went home from his job as a cook on Friday night, the restaurant manager informed him that she would be taking the next two weeks off, and that she was appointing Doug to take her place starting Monday.

Although Doug has more seniority than the other employees and is an excellent cook, he doesn't feel confident in being able to handle the manager's job. Doug doesn't feel comfortable dealing with the customers, using the cash register, or handling conflicts that may arise between employees. He feels that he will fail at being able to fill her shoes. He talks to the restaurant manager and says he doesn't want to take her place. The manager insists that Doug should.

1. Doug thinks if he insists on not filling her shoes, he'll risk his job. What should Doug do?
2. If Doug rejects the offer again, is Doug being disrespectful?
3. How should Doug handle the disagreement with his manager?

Source: <http://conflict911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgi?ID=18994>



[Click here, to read report section](#)

ACTIVITY 11 | Addressing non-discussables

Key Concept: In order to clarify underlying beliefs and/or misconceptions, relevant sensitive subjects should be addressed out in the open.

Theme in paper: Challenge of addressing non-discussables

Readings

This is an article by the Harvard Business Review that discusses how leaders can use alliances to reap the benefits of conflicts.

<https://hbr.org/2016/12/the-right-kind-of-conflict-leads-to-better-product>

This is an article that discusses using emotional intelligence and how to handle hot topics when they arise in an organization.

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/work-conflict-management-emotional-intelligenc>

Activity

Read the scenario listed below and discuss the following questions.

Scenario: Absenteeism

After having spent a great weekend camping, Kyle woke up Monday morning with a fever and a bad stomach ache. He loved his new job but realized that he would have to call in sick. The others would have to pitch in to do his work. As it turned out staying home Monday wasn't enough. He also had to call in sick on Tuesday and Wednesday. Even after three days at home he still didn't feel well but figured that he had better get back to work in order not to jeopardize his job. He went to work on Thursday and struggled through until the weekend.

The next Monday Kyle feels in top shape and everyone, including his supervisor, is friendly to him and glad to see him feeling better. Kyle starts telling them all about the fun he had on his camping trip. He could talk of little else all day. He was so busy talking about his fun weekend that he forgot to thank his coworkers for covering for him. Soon he began to notice tension between himself and his co-workers. His supervisor also seemed more demanding.

1. Is there anything wrong with being absent when you first start a job?
2. What do you think caused the different responses from his co-workers and supervisor?
3. Should Kyle change his communication or behavior with his co-workers or supervisors?

Source: <http://conflict911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgi?ID=18994>

ACTIVITY 12 | Navigating Power Differentials

Key Concept: Power issues that create boundaries need to be addressed so that open communication can occur.



Theme in paper: Navigating Power Differentials

[Click here](#) to read report section

Readings

This is a Harvard Business Review article that discusses how to navigate power differentials during negotiations.

<http://www.hnhr.org/2009/10/addressing-power-differentials-in-negotiation-dont-let-em-push-you-around/>

This is an article by Forbes that discusses eliminating power differentials so that more women can be in places of leadership.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/06/23/how-to-identify-and-banish-power-differentials-to-advance-more-women-to-leadership-roles/#4b2985c6141d>

This is an article about power differentials and the power paradox and how to avoid their pitfalls.

<http://www.hakomiinstitute.com/Forum/Issue19-21/6Power%20DifferentialPowerParadoxyes.pdf>

Videos

This is a 2-minute video on what power differentials are.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSdhm3jFwhQ>

**Activities:**

This is a toolkit that can be used to address power differentials in terms of diversity and identity.

<https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/>

This is a toolkit about recognizing privilege in terms of cultural identity.

<https://ccdi.ca/media/1588/toolkit-2-exploring-my-power-and-privilege.pdf>



[Click here, to read report section](#)

ACTIVITY 13 | Making sense of emotion

Key Concept: Managing and paying attention to the interactions that occur amongst colleagues, anticipating disagreements, and understanding the emotions people can lead to potential breakthroughs.

Theme in paper: Making sense of emotion

Readings

This is an article by the Harvard Business Review that discusses how leaders can use alliances to reap the benefits of conflicts.

<https://hbr.org/2016/12/the-right-kind-of-conflict-leads-to-better-product>

This is an article that discusses using emotional intelligence and how to handle hot topics when they arise in an organization.

<https://www.kornferry.com/institute/work-conflict-management-emotional-intelligenc>

Activity

Read the scenario listed below and discuss the following questions.

Scenario: First Day On The Job

Sheila felt ready to get to work after her one day job orientation for new employees. When she got to work, however, she was shocked. She was not prepared for the fast pace, sophistication and skill level found in her new department. By noon that day, Sheila felt like she was not cut out for the job. She felt underskilled and under prepared to meet her department's challenges.

On her way to the company cafeteria one of her co-workers, Tammy, caught up with her and they had lunch together. Sheila was glad that Tammy was so friendly to her and she was able to relax a little bit. During lunch Tammy talked about their manager, Mr. Smith. Sheila learned that Mr. Smith was in trouble with his superiors. Next, Tammy told her about James, the computer programmer. She told Sheila that James spread rumors and was not to be trusted. She talked about Mrs. Tyler, the accountant. She said that Mrs. Tyler was an alcoholic and frequently took sips from a whisky bottle in her desk.

Tammy asked Sheila to join her for coffee after work. She said, "Trust me, Sheila. Once you come to understand how screwed up everyone is around here, and get the feel of the place, you'll do fine."

1. Why would Tammy be so friendly towards Sheila? What might happen if Sheila gets close to Tammy?

Activity 13 (continued from page 62)

2. Next time, Tammy saw Sheila, how should she react?

3. How should Tammy approach her other peers?

Source: <http://conflict911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgi?ID=18994>

