

10 Principles to Move Your School Toward Distributive Leadership

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The hardest part about teaching (well) and leading (well) isn't creating meaningful learning moments for people; the hardest part of leading and teaching (especially in a school focused on deeper learning) is giving up control.

Giving up control is the key to finding success as a leader, teacher and even parent in a school. First and foremost, you must trust the people around you. For teachers, that means giving the right tools to students, and then trusting students to drive their learning. Parents must trust in this new paradigm for learning and trust in the school leaders.

But administrators may have the trickiest part to play—they must share the leadership role, and trust “their people”—their students, teachers, parents. This distributed leadership approach is a collaborative effort undertaken between people who trust and respect each other's contributions. By using principles of distributed leadership, school administrators can empower people to make great decisions, learn from mistakes and reach new heights.

Here are our 10 guiding principles for schools moving to a distributive leadership structure. (They're inspired by the awesome leaders and colleagues with whom I share this work!)

1. Everyone is a Novice and an Expert

Resist the urge to make some people knowers and other people learners. Everyone has something to learn, and everyone has something to contribute. Make this clear to all on the team and remind them often of this fact.

2. Embrace ALL Parts of Entrepreneurship

Educators love the idea of fostering entrepreneurship, but often forget that part of being an entrepreneur involves making mistakes. Taking leadership risks that sometimes end in failure is a natural way of learning to do better and reaching new heights. In fact, when you get something right, one brain synapse fires; but when you get something wrong, TWO synapses fire. So we shouldn't be so worried about making mistakes—rather we should use them as stepping stones to greater learning and increased success.

3. Know the Vision and Share it Often

If people know where they are going, how they get there is irrelevant. Like a flight to Italy—you don't really care what flight plan the pilot makes, just as long as you land there. Allow your teachers to create their own flight plans, but make sure often that YOU KNOW and THEY KNOW where they're landing! At our school, we spend a lot of time talking about our shared vision. Then we spend even more time mapping our path. People can map their own path once they are crystal clear about where they are headed.

4. Give People Voice and Choice

The choice on how to arrive at a location (see above) is vital to people truly believing in their work. If you have set the vision clearly, then people will choose whatever path is best for them and for students. Trust them to do so and check in to find out what they need. When checking in, make sure you hear all voices. Giving “voice” doesn’t mean every decision is democratic, but it does mean that everyone gives input and all input is valuable. Ask yourself, “Have I heard from everyone?” If not, figure out a way to get more voices—or find out why folks aren’t talking!

5. Systemic Autonomy

To build autonomy and empower your team, you must have systems in place that support self-direction. Autonomy done well is not careless; it is thoroughly thought out, intentional and sustained by the structure and systems you create. For example, rotate leadership responsibilities, like facilitating a school-wide meeting, so every person gets a chance to set the agenda and take responsibility for the conversation about the school and its needs. Another system might be setting up budget line items for each staff member. By giving some budget control to individual team members, they have the opportunity to buy what they need when they need it. Trusting that your staff knows what the organization needs empowers them, builds autonomy AND distributes the leadership in the school community.

6. Hire Well

Don’t ever shortcut hiring! You are creating a team—get everyone involved—staff, parents, and students. Including all stakeholders in the hiring process ensures a shared responsibility and commitment to the school vision. Dynamics and culture will make or break specific projects. (If you want to know why, see number 4.)

7. Get Out of the Way: Don’t Micromanage!

Teachers are entrusted with the lives of children every day—a task none of us takes lightly. We expect them to protect, teach, and care for kids, so why is it so challenging to trust them with other decision-making responsibilities? As leaders, we must let our teachers step up, take control, make mistakes, course-correct and manage their classroom budgets accordingly. We trust them with children; the other things are small in comparison!

8. Allow Opportunities for Assessment

A big part of distributing leadership means checking in, evaluating, reflecting and assessing. We do this naturally with students, but often forget to do so with adults. Reflecting on strengths and finding opportunities for growth can happen often and with a kind-but-discerning eye on school vision and student success. Self-assessment, 360-degree evaluations and feedback cycles are all part of assuring that people are doing what they can and are receiving the support they need.

9. It’s about Skill and Will

Help people on your team find their passion and make their mark. Provide training and opportunities, create individualized professional development plans and create plenty of instances for stakeholders to share their expertise. Building a team of passionate experts is an intentional and ongoing project.

10. Celebrate Small Victories

Make success—big and small—visible and irresistible. People want to be recognized for their great work (even when they say they don’t). And by celebrating great work publicly, you will attract people to the success party (and the school). Everyone likes to be on a winning team; we all want to do what is best for kids, so make all of the great things that are working public!

In the end, all your hard work boils down to trust. Trusting yourself. Trusting the kids. Trusting the adults. Trusting the messy and sometimes chaotic process that is inevitable in a learner-centered field. And finally, trusting your intuition.

We promise you that in the end, your patience and trust will pay off.

Further Reading:

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