Teacher Leadership: Making Your Voice Count

by Kathryn Singh

Discover how distributed leadership in schools works and learn strategies for ensuring that teacher-leaders have a strong and powerful voice.

Today, more than ever, teachers must work effectively and efficiently to meet seemingly contradictory demands placed on them by society. On the one hand, school personnel are tasked with attaining and publicly reporting high levels of student achievement in response to No Child Left Behind (2002). On the other, school personnel must ensure that students learn 21st century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, and

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accessing and analyzing information (21st Century Schools 2008). This dichotomy challenges educators to prepare students to select the right answers on standardized tests and, at the same time, to critically analyze the myriad possible solutions that may be appropriate for addressing problems in daily life. Teachers must prepare students to think both inside and outside the box.

Educators must respond to these demands within a complex environment characterized by demographic shifts, an economic crisis, national political struggles, and a rapid transformation in the way society produces, accesses, and uses information. In this context, teachers must guarantee that students acquire content and skills specified in state standards so that students will do well on standardized tests. Concurrently, educators must teach content and skills that are continually evolving and prepare students for a future yet unknown.

To address the challenges put before educators in the 21st century, organizations must have optimal performance. The design and oversight of the work required to achieve this goal, however, can no longer originate with one lone school leader. And teachers no longer can work alone. Meeting the challenges requires a “heads together” approach. As Hulpia, Devos, and Van Keer (2009, 41) stated, “Leadership is no longer seen as a one-person business, but rather a business that requires social interaction and cooperation of a whole team, leading toward an emergent property”; complexity and a sense of urgency require a new way of defining “the work.” Further, Woods and Gronn (2009) suggested that a more democratic and inclusive way of operating allows organizations to be more effective, increases member engagement and self-esteem, enhances capacity, and permits members to deal more effectively with complexity. Ultimately, democratic organizations, they emphasized, lead to a more democratic society.

**Shared Responsibilities**

Though principals play an important role in setting the vision and moving their staffs toward that vision, it is increasingly apparent that teachers must take on active decision-making and problem-solving roles. By sharing these responsibilities, schools can tap into the expertise of those most in tune with teaching and learning, and thereby become more efficient and effective (Elmore 1999–2000). Teachers are the ones who can truly bring about change. Working in a classroom in isolation, without participating in collaborative problem-solving activities or contributing to daily operations of the school, is no longer a feasible option. Teachers’ involvement in leadership roles allows them to enhance their performance, feel more efficacious and satisfied, and as a result, may lead to increased student achievement. This change of roles, however, requires a paradigm shift.

As teachers become more involved in school-based decisions, the relationship between the principal and the teachers must undergo a metamorphosis. Though the school administrator continues to oversee the process and channel the efforts of staff, he or she ceases to act as the absolute authority, delegator, and monitor. However, the formal leader becomes even more important as a developer of and guide to those participating in the process, helping them recognize when it is appropriate for the leader to “step in” and providing the support needed for their increasing involvement (Harris 2008). The traditional dichotomy of “leader-follower” falls by the wayside, and interactions become more horizontal than vertical. As the organization of work changes, new mind-sets are adopted, and new relationships and roles gradually emerge (Gronn 2003).

To distribute leadership, as Woods and Gronn (2009) have suggested, organizational members must move past the traditional roles played in a “contractual” setting, where status determines relationships and work is accomplished in order to earn pay. These authors advised organizations to be careful to avoid using the distribution of leadership for control purposes, as mere delegation and a way of getting others to do more. They added that strong leadership is needed to move groups in this more democratic direction. In addition, Flessa (2009) investigated the micro-political aspect of distributed leadership and warned that a shift in roles challenges the traditional structure and spurs conflict, which staff and leader must be prepared to address. These new enhanced roles will only be fruitful and satisfying if teachers are fully informed about this model and if formal leaders know how to implement it correctly.

In this article, the author presents a brief overview of distributed leadership, as well as shares insights gained as the result of creating and leading a distributed leadership team for three years at a high school. Working with a team offers benefits; yet, to ensure smooth operation, certain factors must be taken into consideration. The author translates her insights into specific suggestions for both principals and teachers who are becoming more involved in
distributed leadership models at their schools. Ultimately, the goal for teacher-leaders is to enjoy and benefit from the experience as well as to make worthwhile contributions where it counts—in the teaching-learning arena.

**Distributed Leadership**

Models of distributed leadership typically involve the interaction of leaders, followers, and situations that arise in the workplace (Spillane and Sherer 2004). The interaction is collaborative, dynamic, mutually accountable, and based on a match between organizational need and individual expertise. Distributed leadership implies that members of an organization “open their professional doors,” moving from an isolationist to a shared mode of operating. This innovative approach to decision making and problem solving allows participants to share passion for their work, pursue a common vision, take advantage of expertise within the group, and optimize collaboration.

As they work together, school staff members become better equipped to meet the challenges they face on a daily basis. Depending on the immediate issue, various individual members of the group naturally take on leadership roles. They work in diverse configurations, involving varying degrees of interdependence or sequences of interactions, according to the task. They assume different types of roles to move the group along in both tasks and relationships (Barry 1991; Gronn and Hamilton 2004; Spillane and Sherer 2004). When formal leaders create a distributed leadership model, they demonstrate that the organization values the contributions of its members and affirm their belief that all individuals should have a voice (Woods and Gronn 2009).

One example of distributed leadership is a group of teachers in a professional learning community (PLC) who are problem solving about how they might address the issue of low student performance on test items related to place value in math. The principal, a math coach, and several teachers are analyzing student data, exploring benefits and disadvantages of the textbook and accompanying software, and discussing types of assessments used as benchmarks in each classroom. One teacher who uses music in her lessons reminds colleagues that learning a song helps students with content retention, and she offers to create a song on place value and teach it to her colleagues. Another teacher says that he will explore other instructional resources such as interactive Web pages and games. A third teacher says that she is willing to organize walk-throughs so colleagues can observe one another’s classroom to learn new ideas and provide feedback.

The principal speaks up, offering substitute time for two walk-through days, and mentions that there may be funds available for instructional materials. He also points out an upcoming workshop on using games and music to teach math. Each member of the group has stepped up to offer suggestions and, in doing so, has assumed a leadership role—organizing walk-throughs, exploring instructional materials, creating teacher-made materials and sharing them, providing funding, and offering staff development options. The group has identified an issue and has worked together to address it. The solutions are many, and they have come from the group, not from “above.”

Of course, working together in a structure designed specifically for interaction, such as a PLC, does not guarantee that all emerging instructional leaders will be “on the same page” in terms of what the issues are, how to address them, and what their individual and group contributions will be. In fact, unless there is ongoing and honest dialogue that helps them come to consensus, members of the organization may find themselves on very different paths, following very different visions (Martinez et al. 2005). The fear of facing conflict and the potential of having to go “above and beyond” one’s regular responsibilities must not deter staffs from shaping themselves into effective and efficient teaching and learning teams. All members of the shared leadership model must understand the benefits and know what is required to make it effective.

Distributing leadership makes sense for many reasons. Teachers can collaborate to address complex issues. Hulpia et al. (2009) emphasized the positive impact that shared leadership has on teacher commitment, which in turn affects school success. Teachers who believe in the organization’s goals and values are willing to exert the effort required to reach those goals, and feel loyalty toward the organization. Ultimately, sharing the responsibility for school improvement provides a support structure for teachers. Also, a greater sense of professionalism develops as teachers feel more empowered. If distributed leadership seems like a viable option in a particular school, and the goal is to make sure that teachers’ time and energy is being
put to good use, it makes sense to prepare educators to be the best leaders they can be. Strong leadership throughout the school, in time, will make a difference in each classroom.

The Experience
During the period of 2003–2006, this author was founding director of a private high school in Mexico. The school, part of a larger campus that included both a high school and a university, was structured in a hierarchical, top-down fashion. The director’s role was to create an all-new high school on the campus, to hire and train staff for the new site, recruit students, set up a teaching and learning infrastructure, and define daily operations. The director was faced with the option of doing it alone or asking others for help. In the existing traditional structure, teachers did not expect to be involved in decision making, and “higher-ups” were accustomed to obedience, loyalty, and compliance. Moving to a distributed leadership model would be a definite paradigm shift, but the director decided that it would be much less risky than operating as the “lone ranger” and facing the possibility of not making the best decisions or having staff half-heartedly implement them.

The following are lessons learned as a result of using distributed leadership to shape and operate the high school. The staff created a shared vision and plan, helped to hire and train a committed and energetic staff, recruited 500 students, which then grew to 1,000 within three years, and established the high school as a place of purposeful activity and results. The director began with a small team of teachers who had experience working within the same multi-campus system, and then gradually added new members as they became more familiar with the organization. The group included those who worked directly with teachers and students, as well as with parents. The leadership team invited other members of the staff to participate in activities and decisions as the need arose.

In addition to the primary team, a system of alternates permitted other teachers in the various departments to be trained to take on leadership roles. Over time, as a result of their increased capacity and visibility in the organization, some of the “first tier” members accepted formal leadership positions. That allowed many of the alternates to become part of the main leadership team.

The distribution of leadership in this case served a number of purposes: it allowed for the efficient design and effective operation of the new school; it fostered organizational commitment and trust; and it developed capacity in staff members. Because there was intra- and inter-departmental alignment, teachers were able to make sure that students’ experiences at the high school made sense. A number of school-wide events, organized by the team, also contributed to student and parent motivation.

Problem solving on teacher and student issues also took place in the leadership team meetings, allowing all participants to rally around those in need of support. When members were experiencing difficulties, both personally and professionally, the others provided emotional support. This was especially useful because starting a new school can be a time-consuming and stressful endeavor. The director kept staff informed so that they were equipped with information needed to make wise decisions. She also provided training in decision making, teamwork, and leadership, as well as in specific areas in which decisions were being made. Obviously, there were ups and downs, as could be expected with any human collaboration; but overall, the experience was unforgettable and worth sharing.

Lessons Learned as a Principal
Here are some lessons learned as a principal and suggestions for those considering promoting greater involvement in leadership:

1. Power is not finite, nor is it tied to a position; it is tied to expertise and commitment. Related to that, knowledge is not the possession of a few. However, with knowledge and power comes responsibility. It’s like having a key to the front door.

2. Success is more likely if the site team is made up of strong, opinionated, hard-working individuals. Capacity building is crucial. Knowledge and skills must continuously be refined to strengthen the links in the leadership chain.

3. Shared leadership requires trusting relationships. If teachers perceive unfair and dishonest treatment, trust will not develop or will wane, and those teachers will choose not to collaborate. Trust develops through honest and ongoing
dialogue. Teachers must dedicate energy to decisions that are relevant to them, and they must see results.

4. Leadership takes shape while addressing real issues, as the need for expertise arises. Leadership does not come about as a result of delegation or favoritism.

5. Examining decisions from different perspectives makes educators stretch and leads to sound, respected, and implemented decisions. Staff members should welcome positive conflict and debate as an opportunity to grow.

Suggestions for Teacher-Leaders

As teachers are invited to take on a more active role at their schools, it is important for them to consider the following suggestions:

• Don’t let others make decisions that will impact you and your students. You should be involved in decisions that affect you and those you serve (e.g., discipline plans, textbook selection, staff development, budgeting, strategic planning).

• Take the time to get to know your colleagues. Developing relationships builds powerful bridges that connect visions (e.g., reaching out to your neighbor even though he teaches a different grade level, getting to know a new teacher sitting alone in the staff lounge).

• Carefully analyze and reflect on any information given to you about the organization. Every piece of information contributes to the “big picture” and is worth knowing. Organizations are systems, and everything is connected in some way (e.g., budget information impacts instruction, as do policy decisions).

• Go about your business with the “leader lens” on, considering how decisions impact all aspects of the organization—but always keep your “teacher lens” handy (e.g., should money be spent on a part-time counselor or on extra pay for sponsoring after-school clubs?).

• Know your strengths and areas of opportunity. Seek experiences that allow you to continue developing facets of yourself so that you can contribute in multiple ways (e.g., developing the master schedule, being involved in interviewing teacher candidates, writing a grant).

• Always tie leadership to teaching and learning—that is the priority of teacher-leaders. Ask the question: How does this relate to our work (e.g., how facilities impact teaching and learning, how spaces influence what we can do, and how people feel)?

Getting Started

Distributed leadership provides teachers with the opportunity to have a voice in the organization, impact students’ lives, and develop themselves both personally and professionally. It changes the way educators are seen and treated within a school site, community, district, and the profession. As teachers prepare to enter into distributed leadership models, it is best for them to know themselves and others, develop capacity, share and trust, and make decisions focused on the well-being of students and their families. Teachers who take a front seat in designing, delivering, and evaluating the whole teaching and learning process have the potential to do great things.

Distributing leadership is a gradual process that involves gathering knowledge about the model, examining current practices in the school and district, assessing areas of expertise, building capacity, shifting paradigms, opening dialogue, resolving conflict positively, and putting in time and effort. Working together, districts, school administrators, and teachers can move easily toward this model. The model can begin with a leadership team (commonly known as ILT, or Instructional Leadership Team) and can branch out gradually to other staff members, parents, and, at higher levels, even students. At first, there will be adjustments; but with time, everyone will become accustomed to sharing information, making decisions, solving problems together, being mutually accountable, and growing individually and as a group. The next step is to empower students by implementing a distributed leadership model within the classroom itself. It’s a wonderful experience that leads to positive results for all.

References


