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Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams Considerations Packet

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Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

This *Considerations Packet* is designed to support school leadership teams as they guide school improvement efforts. Topics include the rationale for using a team approach, team composition, and necessary skills and responsibilities of the leadership team. In addition, the characteristics of effective teacher leaders and strategies for conducting productive meetings are discussed.

Why Organize a School Leadership Team?

The expectation that all students will achieve academically is a primary focus for schools today. Specifically, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires schools and school divisions to close the achievement gap between traditionally low-performing student groups, including students with disabilities, and their typically achieving peers. Similarly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 requires that schools provide a high-quality education for students with disabilities.

Schools must address the challenges of meeting the needs of all learners. One way to improve practices is to create a school team that will structure and lead processes designed to transform teaching and learning. According to Fullan (2001), “the litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people’s commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things” (p. 9). Further, Friend and Cook (2007) observe that “teaming is the most frequently advocated structure for implementing school reform initiatives” (p. 58), and the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI, 2005) notes that “team leadership helps to facilitate rapid and sustained change” (p. 2).

Using a team approach is also a practical way to ensure that the many leadership tasks that must take place in a successful school are executed efficiently and effectively. Over 20 responsibilities for effective school leaders have been identified (Cotton, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Keeping abreast of research-based practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; serving as a change agent; and evaluating the effectiveness of practices in the school are just some of these leadership tasks. Since “it would be rare, indeed, to find a single individual who has the capacity or will to master such a complex array of skills” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 99), many school leaders have found that creating and guiding a leadership team helps to successfully distribute leadership tasks and responsibilities. Such teams can provide leadership in the areas of problem-solving, communication with colleagues, motivation, professional development, and coaching.

Once school leaders have decided to use a team leadership approach to guide improvement efforts, much can be done to help the team achieve its goal of providing effective instruction and a positive school experience for all students.

What Does a Leadership Team Do?

The National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI, 2005) describes the school leadership team as “a school-based group of individuals who work to provide strong organizational process for school renewal and improvements” (p. 2). It is important that everyone in the school understands what the leadership team is doing. Leadership teams might consider using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process to identify areas of focus and as a way to engage all stakeholders in the change process.

Simply put, AI focuses on “learning from moments of excellence” (Mohr & Watkins, 2002, p. 2) rather than focusing on what the organization is lacking. As such, it enables leaders to “discover the best of what is; imagine what might be; dialogue what should be; and create what will be” (Mohr & Watkins, p. 2). Members of the leadership team can begin the improvement process by asking faculty, staff, students, family, and community stakeholders the following questions, based upon a generic interview guide developed by Mohr and Watkins:

Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

- “Tell me a story about the best time that you have had with your [school] ... [R]ecall a time when you felt most alive or excited about your involvement. What made it an exciting experience? Who else was involved? Describe the event in detail.” (p. 6).
- “What are the things you value about yourself, your work, and your [school]?” (p. 6).
- “What do you think is the core value or factor that allows the [school] to pull through difficult times? If this core value/factor did not exist, how would that make your [school] totally different than it currently is?” (p. 6).
- “If you had three wishes for this [school], what would they be?” (p. 6).

The wishes requested in the last question will help identify areas of improvement. After gathering this information, leadership team members share the stories they gathered and identify the strengths of the school. Building upon the strengths and values of the school will help to motivate staff and foster buy-in, which will help move the school improvement process forward.

Who Should Be on a Leadership Team?

Creating an effective leadership team begins with assembling individuals with diverse skills and perspectives that will contribute to achieving school improvement goals. Chenoweth and Everhart (2002) recommend that the composition of school leadership teams represent the diversity of the staff, students, and community. All grade levels, departments, and specialty areas should be represented. Additionally, team members should be knowledgeable about school improvement efforts and possess diverse skills that will help move the team toward its improvement goals.

Chenoweth and Everhart (2002) also suggest that leadership team members should:

- be committed to school-wide change;
- be respected by colleagues;
- possess leadership potential;
- demonstrate effective interpersonal skills; and
- be able to start projects and “get things done” (p.17).

Successful leadership teams are typically made up of volunteers (Marzano et al., 2005) so it is important that participants be invited to serve on the leadership team, rather than assigned to serve.

Administrators responsible for identifying and inviting teachers to serve as members of a leadership team may want to ask the following questions to help determine if the individual possesses the skills and qualities needed to serve as a teacher leader. The guiding questions that follow are based on the model standards being developed by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2010). “Yes” answers to the questions in Table 1 indicate that a teacher may be well suited to serve in a leadership position in the school.

Table 1 Checklist for Identifying Potential Teacher Leaders

Guiding Questions	Yes	No
1. Is the potential teacher leader familiar with the characteristics of adult learners?		
2. Does the potential teacher leader understand how to apply the collective knowledge of their colleagues in order to improve teaching and learning in the school?		
3. Does the potential teacher leader understand educational research and use that knowledge to model and coach colleagues in the selection and use of research-based strategies?		

Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

4. Does the potential teacher leader understand that teaching and learning is rapidly changing and use that knowledge to support and lead relevant professional learning?		
5. Does the potential teacher leader have a comprehensive understanding of the teaching and learning process?		
6. Does the potential teacher leader model the practices of continuous learning, reflection upon teaching practices, and collaboration with colleagues?		
7. Is the potential teacher leader familiar with current research on assessment (formative and summative) methods?		
8. Does the potential teacher leader use knowledge of formative and summative assessment to focus on continuous improvement of instruction?		
9. Is the potential teacher leader familiar with the cultural backgrounds and languages spoken by the school's families and in the community?		
10. Does the potential teacher leader use knowledge of the school's and community's diversity to reach out to and work collaboratively with family and community members?		

What Does the Leadership Team Need to Know About the Change Process?

Since leading school improvement efforts means that the team will be involved with school change initiatives, team members should become familiar with the change process. Kotter (1996) identified essential steps for successfully negotiating change. Steps and corresponding actions for school leadership team members to consider are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Leading the Change Process: Actions to Consider

Steps	Possible Actions
1. Develop a vision and a strategy.	Zmuda, Kuklis, and Kline (2004) define vision as “what the school community will look like when its core beliefs truly inform practice (p.18).” School leadership teams that use Appreciative Inquiry to identify a focus area can use the core values and wishes identified in the process. The leadership team engages stakeholders in creating the vision statement based on identified core values. The leadership team can also propose a means for achieving the vision (e.g., implement a school-wide literacy approach, improve inclusive practices).
2. Communicate the vision.	Leadership team members use formal and informal opportunities to generate dialogue about the vision and strategy for achieving the vision. Continued conversation and information sharing with all members of the school community will help ensure that there is a school-wide commitment to the vision and related strategy.
3. Empower broad-based action with a well-	The leadership team develops and monitors

Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

designed plan.	an action plan that outlines specific activities or tasks that need to take place to effectively implement the changes needed to move the school closer to its vision.
4. Generate short-term wins.	Fullan (2010) notes “do not load up on vision, evidence, and a sense of urgency. Rather give people new experiences in relatively nonthreatening circumstances, and build on it” (p. 24). Leadership teams should be mindful of the pace of activities supporting the improvement process. The leadership team can build short-term, achievable goals into the action plan and celebrate completion along the way so that all members of the school community feel a sense of accomplishment and maintain momentum.
5. Consolidate gains and produce more change.	The leadership team focuses on continuous improvement as a way to ensure that school improvement efforts continue. Moody, Russo, and Casey (2005) note that the “improvement cycle curves back on itself” (p. 175). The leadership team is continuously looking at student data, examining instruction, developing an action plan for improvement, implementing the plan, and assessing its effectiveness to ensure that improvement efforts move forward.
6. Anchor new approaches in the culture.	The leadership team helps ensure that effective changes implemented as a result of the improvement process become part of the school’s practices and culture. The leadership team may need to examine building practices and structures to make sure they are not hindering institutionalization of the new strategy.

What Makes a Leadership Team Effective?

After the school leadership team has been assembled, specific strategies may be used to support the team in effectively and efficiently doing its job. First, it is essential that the principal give the leadership team the authority to make decisions within the scope of its work (Cotton, 2003).

Group Norms

Once the leadership team has been granted decision-making authority, the team can create meeting protocols to guide its work. The first step is to establish norms or guiding principles that the leadership team agrees to honor.

The Center for Collaborative Education (CCE, n.d.) suggests that teams consider certain areas when establishing group norms. Table 3 presents these areas and corresponding questions for school leadership team members to consider.

Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

Table 3*Establishing Group Norms*

Areas (CCE, n.d.)	Questions to Consider
Logistics	How often do we need to meet in order to do our work? Where and when will we meet? How long should our meetings be?
Timeliness	When should we start and end meetings? Will we start on time or wait for all members to be present? What are our expectations for attendance?
Courtesy	How will we show respect for one another?
Decision-making process	How will we make decisions and reach agreements? How do we reach consensus?
Workload assignment	How can we ensure that the work of the leadership team is being shared? How can we help one another balance the work of the leadership team with other responsibilities?
Setting priorities	How will we make sure that tasks are completed on time and in a logical manner?
Enforcement of norms	What is our plan if the norms are not being followed? Will we revise the norms if needed? Can we add norms?

In addition to establishing and adhering to group norms, school leadership teams can structure productive meetings by

- preparing and distributing a meeting agenda prior to the meeting (see Appendices A and B);
- establishing time limits for each agenda item;
- ensuring that each meeting has a facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper (roles can rotate among members);
- recording tasks, persons responsible, and due dates in the meeting notes (see Appendices C and D);
- establishing a consistent way to regularly share progress and information with all stakeholders, including the principal if he or she is not a member of the team and with other school-based teams;
- establishing a consistent way to get feedback from faculty and other stakeholders; and
- periodically reflecting on the effectiveness of the team.

Effective Communication Skills

To be successful, leadership team members must also use effective communication skills. Below are some strategies, adapted from Gravois, Rosenfield, and Gickling (1998), that team members may use to enhance their communication skills.

Paraphrasing. Repeat in your own words a portion of the information that another team member has relayed to you. For example, “So what you are telling me is that the benchmark data show that sixth graders are having difficulty with the scientific method.”

Perception checking. Reflect back an emotion that may have been communicated in the conversation. For example, “From what I hear you saying, it is frustrating for you not to have all the information you need.”

Asking clarifying questions. Gain a clearer picture, in observable terms, by clarifying what you have heard. For example, “Are you saying that lack of common planning time is making it difficult for teachers to plan appropriate interventions?”

Requesting clarification. Use questions that ask for clarification of what has been said. For example, “Can you tell me more about what you think we could change to make student data more accessible for teachers?”

Summarizing. Near the end of a discussion, concisely restate what you heard to check if it is what the partner meant to say. For example, “Let me summarize what you’ve said. Jim and Angela will write an update on the leadership team’s progress for the next PTA newsletter.”

Asking relevant questions. Ask questions related to the topic at hand that expand the discussion. For example, “What evidence or data do we have to show that our writing curriculum is effective?”

Active/attentive listening. Use nonverbal cues to acknowledge what is being said so that the speaker knows that you are engaged in the conversation. Listeners can use attentive body language, such as making eye contact or leaning toward the speaker.

Visit <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/documents/ict/communicationskillstem.pdf> for additional information on effective communication.

Problem-Solving

School leadership teams may also find it helpful to use a structured problem-solving process. Table 4 presents steps and examples that can be used to aid effective problem-solving.

Table 4

Sample Problem-Solving Process

Step	Questions to Consider
Identify and clarify the issue the team needs to address by phrasing the issue as a question.	How can we ensure that all students are meeting the benchmarks in math?
Brainstorm where there is success regarding the issue.	Where are students who struggle with math doing well?
Identify what is going on in the areas where success is being seen.	What is occurring in these classes that contributes to student success?
Brainstorm ways to incorporate the identified successful practices into the problem area.	How can we infuse math classes with the practices that are helping students succeed in other areas?
Develop a way to measure success.	What formative assessments will we use to measure student progress in math?
Summarize and record the plan for addressing the issue.	What practices will we try in the math classes? Who is responsible for implementation? When is our target date for implementation?

Visit http://www.pbis.org/pbis_resource_detail_page.aspx?Type=2&PBIS_ResourceID=372 to learn about another structured problem-solving process.

Conclusion

Fullan (2010) observes that “change problems come in all shapes and sizes...The goal of all change leaders in these situations is to get movement in an improved direction” (p.9). School leadership teams can provide a vehicle for “change leaders” (Fullan, p. 9) to organize and implement improvement processes that focus on meeting the needs of all students.

Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

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Considerations Packet: Strategies for Creating Effective School Leadership Teams

[T/TAC W&M](#)

Updated January 2011

Additional Resources

Resources on school leadership teams and ideas for effective meetings are available to educators in Superintendents Regions 2 and 3 for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Visit the website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/> for a complete listing of all materials in the T/TAC W&M library. Select the “Resources” link and then click on the “Library” link and enter co-teaching or planning as the subject of the search.

This *Considerations Packet* was prepared by Lee Anne Sulzberger, January 2011.

Appendix A
Team Meeting Agenda Template

Date

Time

Location

Rotating Roles:

Agenda Keeper (Before the meeting, asks team members for agenda items in the form of a question' Sends out draft agenda based on submitted items. Asks for additional items at start of meeting and facilitates prioritization of agenda items). _____

Facilitator (Keeps discussion moving during the meeting). _____

Recorder (Takes notes that summarize discussion and the next steps that need to take place. Checks with group throughout the meeting to ensure accuracy of notes). _____

Time Keeper (Keeps track of time allotted to items and asks group, "Is more time needed or can we move on to the next item? Keeps track of new time limits). _____

Item	Time	Originator	Action Needed*
Celebrations			
Announcements			
Review past meeting notes, process observations (Please read minutes prior to meeting)			
Action Reports			
Prioritize Items			
_____ Item A:			
_____ Item B:			
_____ Item C:			
Total Amount of Time Needed:			
Newly Identified Item 1 (arising from Celebrations, Announcements, Notes Review, Action Reports, or Items to be discussed today)			
Newly Identified Item 1			
Items for next meeting:			

***Key to Action Needed** **I** = Information only **R** = Reflection **R-D** = Reflection and Decision **D** = Decision **B** = Brainstorm

Adapted from material developed by VDOE TTAC at Virginia Commonwealth University, based on the work of Fox and Williams (1991).

**Appendix B
Team Meeting Agenda Example**

June 2, 2010

1:30-3:00PM

Room 2

Roles: Todd H. – Agenda Keeper; Jean S. – Facilitator ; Mandy T. – Recorder; Kim S. – Timekeeper

Item	Time	Originator	Action Needed*
Celebrations	5 minutes	Todd	I
Announcements	5 minutes	Jean	I
Review past meeting notes, process observations (<i>Please read minutes prior to meeting</i>)	5 minutes	Mandy	
Action Reports			
Prioritize Items	5 minutes	Jean	R-D
3 Item A: What will be the meeting schedule after today?	10 minutes	Wyatt	R-D
1 Item B: What does inclusion as a service, not a place, look like?	45 minutes	Kim	I-R
2 Item C: What will our final action plan look like?	30 minutes	Jean	R-B-D
Last Item: What are the role assignments for next meeting?	2 minutes	Shelly	D
Total Amount of Time Needed:	107 minutes		
Newly Identified Issue 1 (arising from Celebrations, Announcements, Notes Review, Action Reports, or Issue Discussions, to be discussed today)			
Newly Identified Item 1			
Items for next meeting:			

***Key to Action Needed** **I** = Information only **R** = Reflection **R-D** = fo Reflection and Decision **D** = Decision **B** = Brainstorm

Adapted from material developed by VDOE TTAC at Virginia Commonwealth University, based on the work of Fox and Williams (1991).

**Appendix C
Team Meeting Record Template**

Team Meeting Record	
Location:	Time:
Date:	
Team Members Present:	
Absent:	
<i>Celebrations:</i>	<i>Announcements:</i>
Item Discussed and Task:	
Persons Responsible:	
When Needed:	
Item Discussed and Task:	
Persons Responsible:	
When Needed:	
Item Discussed and Task:	
Persons Responsible:	

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