A new role: Cultural architect

Some people might expect an article about the learning leader to focus on the skills and knowledge of a single individual, namely the principal. But, in the context of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development, a leader is someone who **promotes a school culture that supports ongoing team learning and improvement**. That means leadership *influences* educators to work toward a common goal of high levels of student learning by developing a school culture that expects and supports professional learning.

Historically, the individual has been the focus of school improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). The thinking goes if we can only improve the content or instructional knowledge of the individual teacher, then the whole school will benefit. Yet, for the past few decades, many researchers have investigated and calculated the role of school's structural and cultural impact on individual effectiveness. This powerful work has revealed organizational norms, structures, and policies that lead to enhanced performance of educators as well as their students. There is a growing consensus that how educators act and interact with each other impacts student learning.

The principal, then, becomes a *cultural architect* who cultivates an organization that focuses on and encourages learning in service to students (Deal & Peterson, 1999). The learning principal **builds a plan, with the faculty, to support ongoing team learning and improvement**. The principal understands that learning teams are the infrastructure for faculty learning. The principal builds a clear set of expectations for learning teams, provides resources and

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> Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

support, and enables teams to meet during the workday.

The learning principal **recognizes the value of team learning and improvement and discusses improvement activities in staff meetings**. While the learning team is fundamental to professional learning, the principal must also continue to bring the whole school together to focus on common goals. If this is not done, small groups can become estranged from each other and competing for resources, recognition, and time (Kruse & Louis, 1997).

The learning principal **recognizes and rewards the accomplishments of teams and improvement efforts**. Our reward system needs to be amended so that team accomplishments receive praise, recognition, and reward.

Finally, the learning principal **conducts conversations, dialogues, and discussions within the school community until team learning and improvement become a shared goal.** A change of focus on team — rather than individuals — will not be accepted readily by all educators. The principal will have to hold countless conversations with staff on the purpose, structures, and outcomes of learning teams and their impact on student learning. Effective learning teams cannot be mandated; team meaning and purpose must become a strongly held faculty belief if they are to truly improve student learning. Beliefs are difficult to change. One way that beliefs change is through continued examination of underlying assumptions. Dialogue is a powerful strategy for these kinds of conversations about how the school staff will move together to improve student learning.

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More references for this column appear in the online version.