KEEP THE LEADERSHIP
PIPELINE FLOWING

Districts can adopt these 5 strategies to streamline succession planning

BY BILL HALL

A school improvement process that relies on professionals learning in concert with each other also holds the key to developing the leadership capacity and sustainability that schools and systems so desperately need. Professional learning communities thrive when districts experience consistent leadership across the district, so succession planning and learning community development must go hand-in-hand. Michael Fullan suggests in *Leadership & Sustainability* (2005) that established professional learning communities are more likely to be disrupted or discontinued when a new leader steps into the principalship. Focusing on internal leadership sustainability can counter this discontinuity of direction (Fullan, 2005, p. 31). Building professional learning communities is the first step in ensuring continuity.

There are a number of ways

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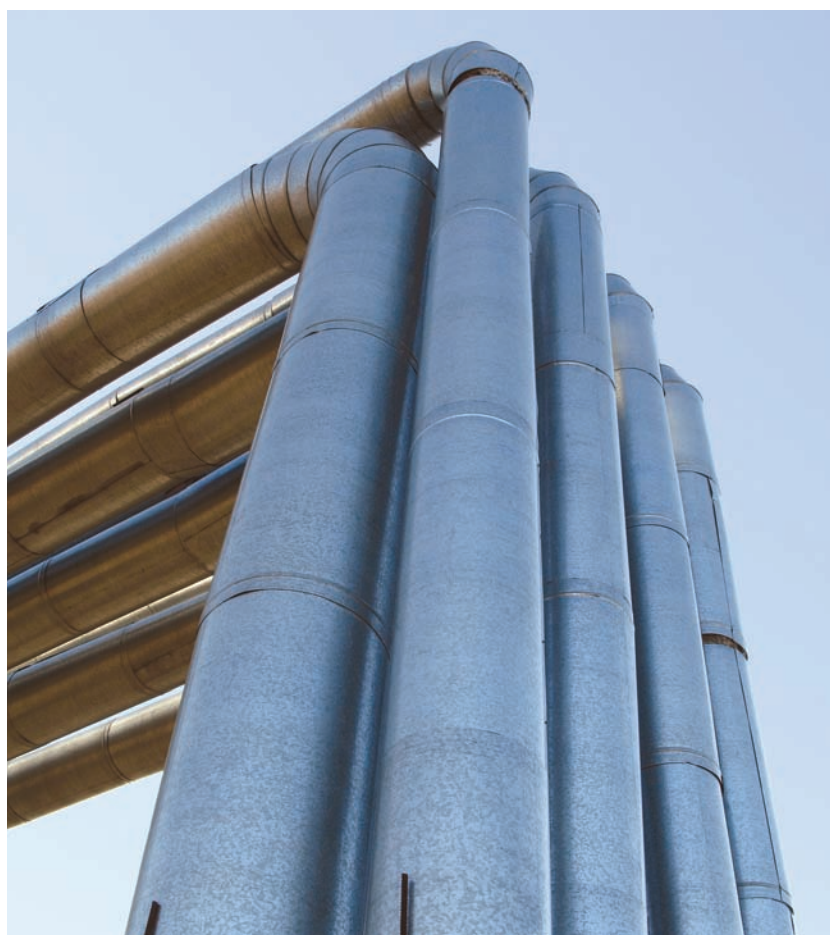
schools and districts can promote leadership development to survive the cultural changes that eventually affect professional learning communities. Here are five essential strategies that facilitate leadership development when implemented in the context of professional learning communities.

1. CREATE A FORMAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN

School systems cannot leave leadership development to chance. Schools must create a formal leadership development plan that specifies leadership development components

and how they relate to each other. The plan must answer such questions as, "Who is responsible for leadership development in our schools and district? What are their specific roles and responsibilities? How will we develop all levels of leadership — at the instructional level, at the support level, and at the administrative level?"

To strategically use professional learning communities to develop the leadership capacity of their personnel, organizations must discuss such questions as, "How will the district support the development of professional learning communities at the school and district levels? What resources must be provided throughout the system to ensure professional learning communities are successfully introduced, implemented, and sustained?"

Monitoring the progress of this plan regularly and reporting the results to the district's senior leadership are critical elements of this strategy. Planning formalizes the district's commitment to develop leadership and holds district leaders accountable. A formal, written plan must clearly identify who is responsible for what action and must be communicated to all stakeholders, underscoring the importance of professional learning communities throughout the leadership development continuum.

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2. DEVELOP A SUCCESSION PLAN

Develop a succession plan at the district level, emphasizing a formal process that spells out how districts will replace their leaders. This plan identifies critical leadership positions and communicates how the district prepares and develops individuals to become eligible for these positions when they are left vacant through

retirements, resignations, and promotions. Districts without formal succession plans waste time focusing on filling individual vacancies. They are constantly trying to answer, "Who will we get to fill a specific employee's vacancy?" Formal succession planning focuses on the "how" of filling vacancies (the process), not on the "who" will fill each vacancy (the individual).

Professional learning communities can be an integral component of succession planning, creating a critical mass of leaders that will continue the focus on school improvement and student achievement. Schools and districts that do not adopt formal succession planning processes and structures expose themselves to external change agents who could dismantle current practice. The support of all levels of district leadership — the superintendent, the school board, the district's leadership team, including building principals — is critical to the success of this strategy. An effective means of ensuring implementation of formal succession planning is for districts to include it in their strategic plan.

3. THINK LATERALLY AND VERTICALLY

To sustain the cultural changes of professional learning communities, a leadership development framework must provide for both lateral and vertical capacity building (Fullan, 2005). This strategy emphasizes developing teacher leadership within the school and encouraging the promotion of eligible school-based leaders into district-level positions as they become available.

To implement capacity building at the school level, principals can use a number of leadership development strategies that use or build professional learning communities. Leading action research and data-driven decision-making initiatives gives teachers opportunities to work with data and focus on the importance of shared

knowledge. Leading collaborative teams allows teachers to develop skills in team organization, communication, facilitation, and curriculum mapping and design. Providing substitutes throughout the year gives teacher leaders time to take advantage of leadership development and school improvement opportunities. Serving in grade-level or department chairmanships, helping organize and lead summer programs, working on task forces or school improvement teams provides valuable experiences for teacher leaders. Becoming a core leader in a subject area gives teachers opportunities for instructional leadership. These core leaders can be released from class during the school day to collaborate on lesson planning and to model lessons for other content teachers. Working as mentors or coaches strengthens how teachers work with and lead adults. Through their day-to-day work in professional learning communities, teacher leaders gain real-world experiences and develop applicable skills that can be used as leadership opportunities arise.

To address the cultural changes that impact the district level, school boards and district leaders must strategically support school-level professional learning community initiatives. The district must provide various levels of leadership development opportunities for teacher leaders, school-based administrators, and district-level administrators. At the district level, give administrators experiences with incremental responsibility, such as serving on a district-level committee or asking them to fill in for district-level administrators during vacation periods or long-term leaves.

To implement this strategy, leaders need to answer such questions as, "What can teachers do in grade levels or content areas to actively assume leadership roles and responsibilities? How can teachers lead groups of adults? What can districts do to

include the perspective of teacher leaders in their districtwide initiatives?"

The best way to prepare people for leadership is to put them into situations where they are called upon to lead. Learning by doing and learning by leading provide powerful experiences when imbedded into the culture of professional learning communities.

4. DISTRIBUTE ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH GUIDING COALITIONS

One way professional learning communities endure changes in the principalship is through vesting leadership not solely in the principals, but in collaborative leadership teams. John Kotter (1996) addresses the importance of creating guiding coalitions, effectively assembled teams of the right people who trust each other and work toward a common goal. These guiding coalitions have the capacity to make needed change happen despite all the forces of inertia. Without powerful guiding coalitions, change stalls and carnage grows (pp. 65-66).

Robert Marzano (2003) also points to the benefits and necessity of distributed leadership through developing and depending on strong leadership teams. Through collaborative leadership teams, novice to expert leaders can realize their potential and contribute significantly by using their abilities and talents. Ideally, leadership becomes the act of getting things done through other people. When schools reach this level of sophistication and trust, professional learning communities provide a seamless way to develop leadership while concurrently meeting students' instructional needs. Through properly

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designed and implemented professional learning communities, leading and learning occur at the same time in the same place.

Essential questions to be addressed in this strategy include, "Who will sit on our guiding coalition? How many members should we have? How will this leadership team be used — in decision making, in an advisory capacity, or a combination?"

By creating guiding coalitions at each school, the leadership load is dispersed among team members. The extent of delegated responsibilities depends upon the experience and leadership maturity of each teacher leader. Distributed accountability among teachers with varying degrees of ability and skill enhances the school's leadership capacity. Strong learning communities develop when principals learn to relinquish a measure of control and help others participate in building leadership throughout the school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 81).

5. MAKE LEADERS RESPONSIBLE AND ACCOUNTABLE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

While this essential strategy is last on the list, it plays no less an important role in promoting leadership development and sustainability. As part of an organization's performance management system, revise all administrative and supervisory job descriptions to include leadership development as an essential job function. Through this board-approved action, administrators and supervisors are annually evaluated on their effectiveness in developing employees who report to them. Included in their annual performance appraisals are the results of the steps they take to develop leadership capacity in their schools, departments, or divisions. Through this one strategy, leadership development becomes every leader's responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Individually, these essential strategies can, to some degree, contribute to leadership development and sustainability efforts. However, when implemented in learning community cultures, these five strategies give districts potential for substantive, sustained leadership development.

Organizations that embrace the concepts of professional learning communities cannot assume that individuals who work in them automatically become leaders. Effective leadership development does not occur on its own. Successful leadership development happens when professional learning communities are viewed as environments where developing leadership capacity co-exists with school improvement efforts focused on student learning.

Schools and systems that integrate leadership development with professional learning communities will be more likely to thrive when they encounter future leadership challenges.

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