

# 6 STEPS *to* LEARNING LEADERSHIP

By Cathy A. Toll

A generation of principals has heard the mantra that they should be instructional leaders, but rarely have they been encouraged to be learning leaders. While an instructional leader pays attention to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of instruction, a learning leader focuses on what is learned and how it is learned. These roles are not mutually exclusive, and they both have value. However, given the dearth of attention to learning leadership in the principalship, I'd like to focus on how that role relates to teacher learning.

Savvy principals support teacher learning by attending to six areas: expectations, demonstrations, hospitality, possibility, inquiry, and the whole learner, and they can practice strategies in all six areas.

## 1. EXPECTATIONS

Early in my years as a principal, I looked upon teachers as either learning or not learning. Some teachers seemed to be constantly growing, while others seemed stuck. The mental metaphor I carried with me was one in which the "stuck" teachers were represented as boulders, and I saw myself with my shoulder against each boulder, pushing with my entire body to get them to move. I saw it as my duty to get unlearning teachers to learn. Over the years, however, I have come to recognize that all people learn all the time, including teachers.



When one stops learning, one is either dead or in a coma!

I had failed to see the learning that some teachers were doing for several reasons: People learn at different rates, and it is more difficult to see learning that is developing slowly. Some people learn cognitively before they ever demonstrate it in their actions or words. Learning is sometimes occurring in an area where the observer is not looking. For instance, one of my teacher colleagues was learning about how to work with the inclusion of special needs students in her classroom while I was looking for learning in math and reading instruction in general.

When a principal believes that some teachers are stuck and not learning, she behaves differently than when she believes that all teachers are learning. The former belief leads to a deficiency view of the supposedly nonlearning teachers and impels the principal to do something to start the learning. The latter belief, that all teachers are learning, leads the principal to behave in a supportive rather than corrective manner, and it also compels the principal to pay closer attention in order to observe the learning that is taking place.

Such recognition ensures that principals tune in to what is being learned as well as to how they, as principals, can support learning that furthers the goals of the school.

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## 2. DEMONSTRATIONS

One would think that it would be easy for everyone in a school to be a learner and to want to be a learner. However, consciously choosing to learn carries with it the admission of a lack. For instance, if I choose to learn how to cook an omelet, I am admitting that I don't know how to cook an omelet! Interestingly, some humans in some situations don't want others to know what they lack, and therefore these people are hesitant to openly place themselves in the role of learner (Bateson, 1995). Demonstrations, discussed in this section, and hospitality, discussed in the next section, are two conditions that make it easier for the learner to be a learner.

Principals demonstrate learning when they share information with teachers. However, despite principals' best intentions, such efforts more often convey the possession of knowledge — in other words, one possible result of learning — rather than the process of learning. Learning itself becomes more evident before or during the process. For instance, principals who engage in study groups with teachers, reading and discussing a piece of professional literature along with the rest of the group, may say more about themselves as learners than principals who tell teachers about a piece of professional literature that they read over a holiday break.

Principals demonstrate learning as well when they

appropriately share something that they do not yet understand. A negative example from my own experience is a time when a teacher asked me for help in understanding how to use geo boards in 1st-grade math instruction. My own work had focused on literacy and leadership for many years, so I was somewhat out of touch with specific instructional practices in math. I'm embarrassed to say that my response was a series of mumbling, stumbling attempts to think of how geo boards might be used and then a lame suggestion that we both look for ideas in our professional reading. Thus, I missed a great opportunity to be a learner, both for my own benefit in knowing more about geo boards in math instruction and also to enhance my relationship with the teacher. I wish I had said, "I'm not sure about using geo boards myself. Should we figure it out together?"

## 3. HOSPITALITY

When I was a university faculty member, I participated in a study group trying to bring social justice issues into our classrooms for preservice teachers. During one discussion, a colleague suggested that it was essential to make classrooms comfortable for students to challenge their long-held views about such matters as race, gender, and socioeconomic class. Another colleague brilliantly pointed out that it is always uncomfortable to challenge personal views, especially those about difficult topics. This conversation prompted me to puzzle over the tension between wanting students to be comfortable challenging their beliefs and knowing that such challenges were inherently uncomfortable.

My struggle ended when I reread Parker Palmer's description of spaces where learning takes place. Palmer says that such places are: open, meaning that there is "space" for learning; bounded, meaning that the learning space was protected from interruptions and detractors; and hospitable, meaning that they serve as comfortable spaces in which to do uncomfortable work (1993). Others have pointed to the need for the first two qualities in teachers learning spaces, when, for instance, they write about the need for uninterrupted time for teacher collaboration (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), but less attention has been paid to the notion of hospitality.

To some, hospitality implies food and beverages and a welcoming smile, but there are more essential elements. The core of hospitality in support of learning is friendliness toward new ideas and the exploration of the unfamiliar, and a welcoming spirit for those who struggle to question themselves and their learning. In a hospitable environment, teachers can be the learners they truly are, with no pretense to know what they don't know and no shame about what they bring to the learning. Thus, when

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difficult examinations of past-held beliefs or current failed efforts take place, these struggles occur within a community that can reliably receive and honor that work.

Principals support hospitality by demonstrating acceptance of every person in the building and comfort with ideas that are different from their own. Acceptance of every person means that dignity and respect are accorded to each teacher, even those teachers who don't always behave how we wish or whose teaching is

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not as current as others. This acceptance occurs for the person, not the person's actions or popularity. This view aligns with the recognition that all teachers want to do well and, when they do not succeed as they might, it is not due to a flaw in character or a failure of intentions. Zander and Zander call this "giving an A" (2002), a term that refers to their approach to colleagues and students, when they give a mental grade of A to each person before working with them. In this manner, Zander and Zander approach their colleagues as strong and committed people whose mistakes

reflect problems but not failures. This produces a shift to problem solving, rather than judging.

Principals who "give an A" to teachers approach those teachers hospitably. In addition, principals set a tone for their entire staff when they show hospitality for ideas different from theirs. When disagreements occur in groups, many people pretend they do not exist, while others too quickly cede to others' viewpoints or to a compromise position. In environments that are hospitable to learning, divergent views are recognized and openly considered. In fact, the tension among competing views is recognized as a healthy source of growth for those involved (Achinstein, 2002). In mature learning communities, participants recognize that differences are a rich source of potential understanding and learning (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001).

To support the hospitable consideration of differing perspectives, principals can engage in one of more of these tactics:

- Point out to the group that competing perspectives exist.
- Remind participants that divergence provides opportunity for learning.
- Ask participants to give their colleagues an A and then consider why opposing viewpoints held by colleagues make sense to those colleagues.
- Ask participants to talk about why their perspectives matter to them. This often yields statements of common beliefs and values that everyone in the group shares.
- Invite participants to think ahead one month, one year, or five years, and consider the outcomes if they were to adopt the opposing position.
- Facilitate a process of elaborating exactly what differences do exist among competing perspectives. By putting these differences in writing, the differences may become clearer, sharper,

or less distinct, depending upon the content.

- Invite participants to reflect upon the discussion and revisit it at the next meeting. With a bit of time, competing perspectives often become less significant or the significance between the perspectives becomes clearer and thus easier to address.

One thing that a hospitable environment does not guarantee is a resolution to differences. This in itself may reassure participants, given that it may make them feel less pressured to either defend their views or give them up. However, the discussion of the group's differences will likely turn at some point to a question of how to resolve the matter. Principals may find it useful to help the group delineate its options before moving forward. Typically, those options include: resolving differences by selecting one perspective to "win"; maintaining the differences and choosing to go in two directions or with two plans; finding a compromise that includes a little bit of what everyone wants; or finding a new approach, a new possibility to everyone in the group. Typically, the idea of failing to reach a conclusion makes people uncomfortable, but they may need to consider it as a real possibility. However, by recognizing the limited options available and discussing them, group members will be able to recognize the choices they are making and, with hospitality, they will be able to live with those choices.

#### 4. POSSIBILITY

Learning can only occur when a learner sees possibility. For instance, a teacher struggling to create a productive learning environment in his classroom will only learn to do so if he believes he and his students can indeed create such an environment. Thus, creating possibility is a useful precursor to teacher learning.

Principals support possibility in two ways: providing new visions of what might be and encouraging new lenses for seeing what is. To provide new visions of what might be, principals can invite teachers to visit other schools or classrooms, share videos to highlight particular approaches to instruction or curriculum, organize a study group to read other educators' descriptions of their work, or invite teachers to share their own successes.

Support for possibility through new lenses occurs when teachers see the familiar in a new way. Principals offer such opportunities when they invite teachers to look at student products from an adjoining grade level and give feedback to the students' teachers; ask questions that probe the basis of teachers' claims about students — "How do you know?," asked in a neutral voice, can prompt great reflection; encourage teachers to think about how others might view student actions or work — for instance, how would the students' parents view their cooperative group work or how would a poet look at their writing?; or neutrally offer their own perspective.

#### 5. INQUIRY

The questions we ask often reveal what we value. Principals'

values are conveyed somewhat explicitly by the questions they ask in formal supervisory conversations and in faculty meetings, and somewhat less explicitly by what they look for on walk-throughs or on teacher-effectiveness checklists.

Principals might choose questions, then, that reflect their value of teacher professional learning. For example:

- What have you learned about your students since the start of the school year?
- How have you adjusted your work because of something you have learned?
- When you think about a struggling student, what would you like to learn about him/her?
- What new understanding has been most helpful to you this year?
- What information did you use to make that decision?
- How are you learning?
- How can I support your learning?

## 6. THE WHOLE LEARNER

The Ancora Imparo (AIM) Model of Teacher Learning (Toll, 2010) demonstrates the three aspects of identity that change due to learning: knowing, doing, and being. Too often in schools, an emphasis is placed upon learning new things to do. To an extent, this makes sense, because teachers are practical people and teaching has an aspect of performance to it. However, learning that emphasizes the doing aspect of teaching often fails to “stick.” This is

evident, for instance, in the myriad workshops, coaching programs, and supervisory meetings that discuss best practices for teachers. Teachers attend to certain best practices and implement them in their classrooms for a short time, but six months later, those practices are often nowhere to be seen. Practices last when they are consistent with teacher knowledge — for instance, when teachers see that the practices support what they know about students’ particular strengths and what they understand about learning the subject matter at hand — and when they cohere with teachers’ ways of being — in other words, when they match teachers’ beliefs, values, and perspectives.

Principals who are learning leaders support all three aspects of teacher learning. Certainly they recognize the value of teachers’ practices, but they emphasize the need for teachers to know why they are implementing those practices, when those practices are best used, and how they might evaluate the appropriateness of particular practices for particular students. Thus, savvy principals emphasize the need for teacher learning to focus upon their understanding as much as their behaviors.

Principals are less able to directly influence learning connected to teachers’ identity related to being. While a person’s beliefs, values, or perspectives shift all the time, often such shifts are not because of another person’s direct intervention. However, principals can support teacher learning in this area by recognizing it as an important aspect of teaching; Parker Palmer aptly says that “we teach who we are” (2007, p.1). Thus, helping teachers to get in touch with and honor their beliefs, values, and perspectives and teach according to them — in other words, encouraging teachers to learn about the being aspects of their identity as teachers — is of great importance.

Secondly, principals who are learning leaders can help teachers recognize that they are constantly learning in ways that shape their being. This kind of learning takes place subconsciously as educators interact with students, colleagues, the profession, and the larger community. By recognizing that this learning takes place all the time, principals call teachers’ attention to important aspects of themselves that they sometimes overlook. Third, principals can honor the completeness of teachers and their learning by posting announcements for teacher retreats, personal growth workshops, or health enhancement opportunities, all ways of recognizing that teachers are most effective when all aspects of their being are learning and engaged.

When they engage in creating hospitable learning spaces, demonstrating learning themselves, asking learning-oriented questions, honoring the entire learner, and offering possibilities, principals are likely to find even more ways to lead learning. Of course, such strategies are not for principals alone. They can be shared by teacher leaders, parent leaders, district leaders, and others. However, as a visible and influential part of every school, principals’ roles as learning leaders can greatly enhance the teacher professional learning that takes place.

### STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING LEADERSHIP

- Recognize that all teachers are learning.
- Engage in learning along with teachers, in study groups and inquiry projects.
- Speak openly about matters about which you need to learn.
- Partner with teachers in learning something new.
- Support hospitable environments in which divergent perspectives can be considered.
- “Give an A” to those with whom one disagrees.
- Demonstrate openness to divergent perspectives.
- Point out options for groups in which participants disagree.
- Offer opportunities for new visions of what might be.
- Ask questions that shift the lenses by which teachers see what is.
- Ask questions that emphasize learning as a value.
- Support learning that enhances knowing as well as doing.
- Honor learning that shifts teachers’ being to deeper values, perspectives, and beliefs.

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**Cathy A. Toll (cathy@partneringtolearn.com) is the lead consultant for Toll & Associates. She focuses on guidance for teacher learning, particularly coaching and small learning teams, and support for those who lead such learning. ■**