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THEIR VOICES INFLUENCE.
From left, Oprah Winfrey speaking at Minerva Awards this fall in California, businessman and philanthropist Bill Gates, educator Geoffrey Canada.

THOUGHT LEADERS

WHO THEY ARE, WHY THEY MATTER, AND HOW TO REACH THEM

By Hayes Mizell

A thought leader is a person or group of people espousing ideas that influence the thinking and actions of many others. National media have recently featured some prominent thought leaders in education. Davis Guggenheim’s documentary “Waiting for Superman” and the related coverage of education included panels, specials, and talk show interviews. It’s not surprising to see Michelle Rhee or Geoffrey Canada speaking with passion about what needs to happen in education — this is their field of expertise. But when Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey focus their attention on education, they reach a wider audience.

One of Learning Forward’s strategic priorities is to engage thought leaders. The organization’s rationale for this

priority is that “educators are influenced by individuals and organizations with whom they have ongoing and trusting relationships.”

Therefore, Learning Forward chose to strategically engage individuals and organizations to advance the organization’s purpose.

The goal of this strategic priority is that, by 2012, an increasing number of members will report that individuals and organizations they view as professional development thought leaders are communicating messages consistent with Learning Forward’s purpose.

Reaching out to thought leaders is not a strategy solely for media giants or organizations such as Learning Forward. Any group or individual working to disseminate information or change the status quo — whether in professional development, education in general, or society at large — can employ this means of spreading a message.

WHO ARE THOUGHT LEADERS?

People often become thought leaders when they serve in local, state, or federal government. Certainly they are treated as thought leaders because of the power they are presumed to possess. Everyone wants to reach elected and appointed officials to help them shape messages and opinions and to leverage their influence.

State and local thought leaders are in positions of authority, have platforms to share their views, and take positions on public policy issues. In terms of seeking an audience with a policy maker, turning to state or local leaders makes sense. Many people know or have personal relationships with thought leaders at this level.

Many policy makers at the state level have the potential to impact professional development. Elected or appointed state-level officials, including governors, state legislators, state school board members, and the state superintendent, will to a greater or lesser extent need to take a position on professional development. Meanwhile, state teachers, principals, or superintendents of the year certainly have influence and, for a short time, will be in the media spotlight. State education organization leaders or executives, including union officials, are also important decision makers.

At the local level, leading influencers include mayors or county commissioners and city council members. Within the school system, thought leaders could be school board members, the superintendent, central office administrators, district directors of professional development, principals, teachers, and teacher association officials or union presidents.

Outside of education, leading figures at the state or local level include business executives, who increasingly are becoming involved in education, foundation leaders, advocacy organization leaders, and members of the media.

Thought leaders aren't necessarily in obvious positions of power. In education, particular active parents might function as thought leaders because of the leadership they have demonstrated in specific situations. Local or specialized bloggers might carry significant weight with a large number of readers, thanks to their

compelling messages. Local athletes or other celebrities often use their voices to influence change in causes that matter to them.

UNDERSTANDING THOUGHT LEADERS

Those who become and remain thought leaders use just a few key strategies to maintain their influence.

1. They have a compelling idea that is timely.
2. They have the ability to communicate their ideas clearly and forcefully.
3. They stay “on message” over time.
4. They have a loyal group of disciples.
5. They make frequent use of all available media.

WHY THOUGHT LEADERS SHOULD CARE ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As educators reach out to thought leaders to engage them in conversation about professional development, it is important to make the connection between their interests and effective professional development. Key considerations in making this connection include:

- Increasing student achievement is a federal, state, and local priority — everyone understands that.
- All educators participate in some form of professional development. Most thought leaders will likely understand this fact but may have an image of professional development that is not aligned with effective professional learning.
- Substantial public funds support professional learning. This alone will make professional development an interesting topic to thought leaders.
- With each new school year, educators confront greater challenges to student learning. Shifts in demographics and societal transformations give educators more to learn about.
- Educator learning + application = student learning. Making the connection between what educators learn and what students learn is critical.
- Thought leaders outside of professional learning likely have no orientation to or understanding of school-based, team-based professional development and its benefits.

LEADING THE WAY



In history

- St. Paul
- James Madison
- Abraham Lincoln
- Susan B. Anthony
- Mohandas K. Gandhi
- Pope John XXIII
- Martin Luther King Jr.
- Betty Friedan



In professional development

- Dennis Sparks
- Stephanie Hirsh
- Richard DuFour



In education

- John Dewey
- Benjamin Bloom
- John Goodlad

- They also may not have any understanding about the results of professional development.

INFLUENCING THOUGHT LEADERS

Working to leverage thought leaders for the cause of advancing professional development is important for a variety of reasons.

- There is a widespread mental model of professional development that contributes to ineffective practice.
- Many educators, policy makers, and citizens are uninformed about effective professional development.
- Spreading informed thinking about effective professional development will lead to more effective practice.

However, engaging thought leaders requires more than preparing a five-minute laser talk or dropping off a brochure. A process of deep engagement and building relationships is necessary to influence thought leaders and move them to take action.

The following are several steps for building these relationships.

Identifying thought leaders

As you identify whom to contact, consider the following questions:

- What evidence is there that the person is a thought leader?
- Whom does he or she influence, and how?
- What is his or her key compelling message? What connections do you see to professional learning?
- What else do you know about the thought leader, either personally or professionally?
- Does anyone in your circle of professionals and acquaintances have a previous relationship with the thought leader? Can the relationship be referenced in the conversation?

The venue

Establishing and maintaining a productive relationship with thought leaders could include a variety of activities throughout the year. Here are a few examples.

- Meet with them individually.
- Invite them to lunch.
- Invite them to speak at a school or district event.
- Invite them to dialogue with a group of educators at a special meeting the school or district organizes and facilitates.
- Invite them to go on a field trip to observe exemplary professional development.
- Attend related events that are important to the thought leaders and engage with them there. Show how you share mutual interests.
- Establish a regular schedule for meeting with them at least twice a year and hold fast to that schedule.

Consider any regular or annual events the school or district holds as opportunities to bring in thought leaders you might not have previously included. The more opportunities you iden-

tify to build connections between thought leaders and the school or district's interests, the better.

Plan the conversation

- What do you or your school, district, or organization want to accomplish as a result of the conversation?
- What do you want the thought leader to learn from the conversation?
- What do you want to learn from the conversation?
- What questions should you be ready to ask — and answer?

As you prepare for the conversation, keep in mind what thought leaders bring to the table. They may already have a strong commitment to another education issue. They may have established opinions about professional development based on previous experiences as a participant, or based on what they have heard from others. They may believe that professional development is a marginal issue, not at the core of improving education. They may have skepticism about the results of professional development and ask for evidence that effective professional development makes a difference for students and schools. They may need concrete examples in their own cities or districts.

Thought leaders may be ready for a deep exchange, demonstrating concern about slow progress in efforts to increase student achievement. Perhaps they are concerned about unexamined “business as usual” in education practice, including professional development. They may have concerns about the costs and benefits of school improvement initiatives.

These concerns make the thought leader a good potential partner. If a thought leader is ready to ask tough questions, he or she is likely open to meeting new allies who can help advance an issue of mutual interest. Clearly, such a person wants to identify sources of useful information and expertise.

Begin the conversation

- If possible, take two or three (no more) people to a meeting. One person should focus on engaging in the conversation and one on taking careful notes.
- Assume that professional development won't necessarily be on the leader's radar screen.
- Engage thought leaders in conversation that stimulates their thinking, causing them to reflect and realize what they don't know. Most importantly, help thought leaders realize how professional development relates to their interests or responsibilities.
- Before you leave, be sure that the thought leader realizes you are an important potential ally and source of expertise. Your compelling message will help the leader connect your name and face with an important issue — professional development.

Ask rather than tell

Find out where the thought leader stands on your key issue

to identify possible mutual interests or problems.

Example: “We’re meeting with leaders to learn more about their perspectives on professional development. By professional development, we mean structured learning experiences intended to improve the performance of educators currently employed by school systems. Can you share with us some of your views and impressions about the professional development of public school educators?”

Listen carefully

- Go with the flow in your conversation. Be flexible about where the conversation goes.
- Be alert to identifying the “seam” between the thought leader’s interests and the interests of your school, district, or organization.

- Don’t be pushy, but take advantage of openings in the conversation such as the thought leader’s statements of interest, problems, questions or suggestions. Don’t miss an invitation to clearly state your point of view.
- Keep the conversation moving. You may need to provide openings of your own with questions, problems, and statements of need.

Focus on their interest

You might be able to predict some of the thought leader’s major concerns. Be prepared to respond to those concerns during your first conversation.

Example: “Yes, we agree that making time in the school day for more intensive, sustained professional development can be a problem. However, there is a lot of experience and informa-

tion about how to make time available. How can we work together to inform schools about the possibilities? How can we collaborate to advocate for the state or school district to provide permission, incentives, and technical assistance that encourages schools to make more time for professional development, and use that time effectively?”

Focus on results

Even as you are probing for the thought leader’s perspectives, make clear your focus on the connection between adult learning and student achievement.

Example: “Educators are facing so many challenges in their schools and classrooms. They need as much help as they can get to increase student achievement. What are your thoughts about the effectiveness of this state’s or school district’s professional development in helping our educators perform at higher levels?”

Focus on value

Almost any thought leader will care about the money involved in funding professional development. Make clear your interest in ensuring that professional development is a wise investment.

Example: “We want to understand more about the rela-

tionship between the state’s or school district’s funding of professional development and its impact on educators’ performance. Can you tell us the total the state or school district spent, from all sources, for all types of K-12 professional development during the past year? Can you share with us evaluations of how this money was used and the results?”

Focus on exemplars

Ground your compelling ideas about effective professional development in research and examples that any thought leader can comprehend.

Example: “There is a lot of research and experience about professional development that is effective in improving teacher and student performance. Would you like some information about these practices? Would you like to know about school districts and schools in this state that are successfully implementing such practices? Are you satisfied that our state or school district is using professional development practices that have the greatest potential to improve the performance of educators and students?”

Focus on next steps

When it appears the conversation is about to conclude, shift

the discussion to the specifics of follow-up. Identify one or more of the thought leader's major interests. Offer a suggestion of what you will do next, such as schedule another meeting, send a letter, share a publication, or organize a field trip. Clarify what the thought leader has either agreed to do or can do to follow up, such as meet again, obtain information, intervene in a specific way, or otherwise take action.

However you end the conversation, be sure to make a concrete commitment and try to get a concrete commitment.

After the conversation

If you had a partner or two with you during the conversation, debrief as soon as possible. Talk about what you learned about the thought leader — what was his or her level of receptivity, interests, expertise, knowledge and experience gaps, misunderstanding and insights? Consider what new information you have. Assess together the potential to further engage and influence the thought leader.

Most importantly, what do you need to do to follow up? Write a thank-you letter to the thought leader and refer to specific high points in your conversation. Be sure to reaffirm commitments you both made to one another. One valuable resource to share, either in person or after the meeting, is Learning Forward's *Why Professional Development Matters* (Learning Forward,

2010). This free booklet, written for parents, community members, and policy makers, explains in fundamental terms what professional development is and why it is an important school improvement strategy. (Download a copy at www.learningforward.org/advancing/whypdmatters.cfm.)

For your own notes, create a more detailed accounting of the conversation, including agreements for next steps. Add the thought leader to any mailing lists that might be appropriate.

Your final step for this conversation will be to think about your next conversation. Whom else do you need to contact? What will you do differently? What outcomes do you expect? As you continue this process, carefully assess your efforts.

LEVERAGE INFLUENCE FOR PROGRESS

Those leaders whose voices carry weight and attract followers have the power to change outcomes. Having the ability to leverage that power is an important strategy in seeking change in education. When thought leaders, both within and beyond education, understand professional development and its importance, they can become a force for more effective professional learning.

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