

Q&A with
ANTHONY MUHAMMAD

LEADERSHIP THROUGH LEARNING

WHEN PEOPLE ARE ENLIGHTENED, THEY WANT TO TAKE ACTION

By Tracy Crow

JSD: Tell us how your beliefs about teaching and learning took shape over the course of your trajectory as a leader.

Muhammad: I grew up in Flint, Mich., which is a city notorious for its level of unemployment. The school I went to was not very child-centered — it was more adult-centered. I was able to be successful in school primarily because my mother was a teacher who made it nonnegotiable. No matter how good or bad the instruction, you had to do well. So I did well because of the environment at home, but then my friend, a very intelligent young man, just floundered in the system, and that gave me an idea very early on about what didn't work in schools.

Even as a middle and high school student, I started to gravitate toward certain teachers who seemed to have more universal success. I noticed that my friends who were

failing all their classes were doing well with them. Even as a student, I talked about my theory about what a good school was and what good teaching looked like.

I went through the stages of getting my certification and becoming a practitioner, but I was always chomping at the bit to be at the helm of a system that was able to make sure every child was successful. I knew it was possible. I knew the type of educator that I admired. I wanted to create a system of people like that rather than have them behave like a superhero amongst a sea of bad practice. I wanted them to be normal.

JSD: When you were a principal, what kinds of learning were particularly valuable for you?

Muhammad: I was one of the geeks who loved organizational theory. The professional learning community model was really an eye-opener for me, to see how you can take these great ideas and institutionalize them. And I think my staff appreciated the fact that I could take an



ANTHONY MUHAMMAD

- He began his career in education as a 7th-grade teacher in Michigan. He moved into school leadership first as an assistant principal and then as principal for a middle school.
- During his five years at the school, he and his staff doubled student achievement scores through the use of professional learning communities.
- Muhammad was recognized as the Michigan Middle School Principal of the Year in 2005.
- He has since become a consultant, sharing his strategies for leadership and success as a writer and speaker.
- His books include *The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach: Transforming Schools at Every Level* (co-authored with Sharroky Hollie, Solution Tree, 2011) and *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division* (Solution Tree, 2009), and he was a contributing author to *The Collaborative Administrator: Working Together as a Professional Learning Community* (Solution Tree, 2008).

Anthony Muhammad

idea and create a system with it. So my professional learning was really accelerated with the professional learning community model, but I've always been a student of leadership.

I studied leadership from many perspectives, not just education. Michael Fullan was someone I admired because his writing was so compelling. He had a great impact on me with *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* (Corwin Press, 2003). I also appreciated authors who focused on pedagogy like Robert Marzano, and I followed Ernest Morrell, who was linking student interest to learning.

I try to evolve as a leader, and it's a strategy that I've used for years. My wife is a big reader, and I used to be embarrassed at night because she would be reading and I wasn't reading anything. I was watching mindless stuff on television. So my whole journey to becoming a heavy reader of literature and research started with competition with my wife not to look dumb. Every day, I read at least 30 minutes and usually longer. Thirty minutes a day has allowed me to read probably upwards of 250 to 300 books in education and educational theory.

MODEL BEING A LEARNER

JSD: How does a principal focus a school on the core work of learning?

Muhammad: The first chief step for a principal is to be a learner and to personally model being a learner. It's difficult to get others to do something that you don't value. It's like going into a retail store where the salesman is trying to sell you something that he doesn't believe in. It comes off as something that's not authentic, and, as a consumer, I can tell. I knew it would be hypocritical as a principal to push my subordinates to develop themselves if I weren't doing it myself.

The principal also has to create a realistic picture of the challenges the school has. It's the principal's job to help the practitioner see that the reason we have these challenges

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is that there are certain skills that haven't been developed. As Einstein said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." If the leader can paint a clear picture of what the challenges are and what the vision for the school is, it becomes a lot easier to motivate people to learn because they see it in the proper context.

I am not a big advocate of add-ons. I am a big advocate of being efficient, cutting out things that aren't working, and replacing them with systems that are more conducive to teachers' needs. I had an idea about a continuous system of teacher learning in our school. We started with our leadership team, doing an analysis of our data. After analyzing our data, we would create five SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) goals for the school every year. Based on those SMART goals, we would then draw up a course of study for teachers. We'd ask, "What does the literature teach us about this problem, what have public schools done to solve it, and what have some of the latest studies taught us about understanding the nature of the problem?" And we created a whole year's worth of study material.

Our staff meetings twice a month became our learning centers. We'd map out a whole year's lessons where teachers were given reading assignments, and they were placed in study groups where they simultaneously discussed the same questions. There was a study group leader in each study circle, and all of this material that we provided was directly related to our SMART goal.

If we wanted to reduce the number of students who were struggling with comprehension of informational text, we worked with the best research on how you teach kids informational text. That was the basis for our study. The learning centers replaced our staff meetings. In the two hours a month we used to spend on nonsense and lightly

put-together agendas, now we had aim and purpose. The leadership team had mapped out a plan over the course of a year. This wasn't a book club where we brought in an interesting book. This was intentional study based on what we knew were the most pressing issues. We put people in an environment where they could wrestle with these ideas, break them down, and probe the questions raised in the literature.

The learning center was the launching pad for the think tank that we developed to generate good ideas. Only after study and discussion would we start to create models that were a hybrid of what we'd studied. We would create systems based on

our collective understanding. As teachers, we never went into a new strategy blind. We looked at different ideas, we considered what would work and what wouldn't in our environment. We collectively developed these new systems, which was how we were able to double student achievement in five years.

One piece of advice I'd give to principals is to be careful not to stymie the creativity of their teachers. That's where all the great ideas are going to come from.

JSD: How did you come to realize that the system was at the heart of what you needed to address to turn things around? It seems like it takes a lot of people a long time to get to that realization, but you knew it early on in your career.

Muhammad: Probably because of my personal experience of being part of a dysfunctional school system. As a child, I disliked it, and I could see the culture and mentality that accompanies that system. I understand now that systems are developed by people. The systems are spread out — they don't develop themselves. I'm not of the belief that systems change people. I believe that people change systems. I believe that study and professional learning are good ways to change people's perspectives, and, from that change of perspective, we create new systems. The result of our initial learning centers was the development of some of our systems, but we didn't focus on the systems and then hope new systems would change how people think.

Years of organization research teach us that the real systemic shifts happen when people change and when people create a new system out of a need that they collectively agree on. When people are enlightened, they tend to want to take action. I wanted my staff to be part of creating our system, but that meant that they had to be at a certain level of enlightenment and that they needed professional learning in order to be qualified to make those changes. Shared leadership is a really important concept, but there is a level of qualification that an employee has to reach to be qualified to share leadership. Simply hanging around for years doesn't qualify you to share leadership.

EXPERIMENT WITH IDEAS

JSD: How do you jump-start the kinds of transformation that make a difference in schools?

Muhammad: The whole pilot and experiment model would serve us well in education. We jump too quickly into big systems, and we don't experiment with ideas. One piece of advice I'd give to principals is to be careful not to stymie the creativity of their teachers. That's where all the great ideas are going to come from. I'll give you a couple of examples. In my school, we had a couple of creative and effective programs that started off from conversations in our learning centers. One of our 7th-grade English teachers approached me. We were studying Ernest Morrell's book *Linking Literacy and Popular Culture*

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(Christopher-Gordon, 2004), and he was always interested in learning about video and film. He had an idea about starting a class to teach screenwriting, film development, and video.

I started him off with a small experiment after school with a group of kids who were interested. I gave him a small amount of funding, we created the parameters and embedded it in an evaluation tool to give us feedback on whether the class was reaching its objectives. It went very well, and it became a full-fledged elective class the next year.

In another example, a math teacher who also had English certification knew that a lot of her kids were interested in the music industry, particularly hip-hop, so she wrote a teacher grant and we started her class as an after-school pilot. She got enough money to put studio equipment in our school. She wanted to help students take their interest in music and channel it through academic means, and that ended up becoming a famous program for our school.

These were both ideas where we monitored the product development before we implemented anything systemwide. There are also some things people tried that didn't work, but doing that in a pilot setting doesn't disrupt the movement of the school. Much of what we accomplished in my former middle school was through action research. By using others' ideas combined with our own implementation process, we created things that were uniquely ours. We can overuse the term "research-based" because, in reality, research is always ongoing in schools.

I just finished reading Patrick Lencioni's book *The Advantage* (Jossey-Bass, 2012). He talks about a trend that he sees nationally but in education in particular. It's a need to be smart as opposed to healthy. He talks about things that are smart and things that

are measurable. Things that are healthy are hard to measure. For example, how do you measure culture? Lencioni points out that your ideas that you consider smart won't work if they don't happen in an environment that's healthy. If you're smart and not healthy, you have all these ideas that look good through some empirical research method, but they won't amount to anything if your environment is toxic.

CREATE A HEALTHY CULTURE

JSD: So how do you go about establishing healthy cultures so transforming results becomes possible?

Muhammad: Establishing healthy culture takes an understanding of human beings. Sociology has been underutilized in educational leadership. We have the assumption that creating

consistency alone will transform an environment. I like to use the analogy that culture is like soil, and the structures are like seeds. We spend a lot of time and resources on developing the seed, and we forget about the environment in which that seed is going to be cultivated.

There are some key elements that leaders have to acknowledge if they are going to develop healthy cultures. No. 1, they have to be good communicators. If a leader does not communicate the priorities of the organization well and

people have to guess what direction the organization is taking, that lack of communication can trigger other unhealthy behavior that becomes the death sentence for the organization's culture. We need to process ideas as a unit.

The second key element is building trust. It is not uncommon for a teacher in her 10 years in a building to experience six, seven, eight, sometimes double-digit number of administrators who have come and gone. That brings some relationship baggage. When administrators enter a school or a district, they have to recognize that trust is a factor. We know that people who have their trust violated become apprehensive at the start of a new relationship — some of them because of the ones that didn't go so well, and some because they had a good relationship with the previous leader and the new person has to measure up. Everybody's need for trust is different. People don't tend to go along with a change if they don't understand what needs to be done or if they don't trust the system or the people leading the system.

The third area in building culture is capacity building. I've seen leaders who are great communicators, who do well in building trust and relationships, but they create visions or goals that they've never prepared people to be able to undertake. I hear a lot about using data to inform the system, and I ask leaders all over the country, what does that mean, and how do you prepare teachers to do that?

I believe teachers teach the best they know how. Giving teachers data on the effectiveness of the methodology that they use doesn't mean they know how to use that data to choose alternative pedagogical strategies if they don't have any. It becomes the leader's role to provide that teacher with a set of alternatives and training in her class, so that when she gets that data, she will know which strategy to use because she understands those strategies.

The last aspect of building culture is that leaders have to have high expectations and hold people accountable. Leadership is a balance between support and accountability; support has to precede accountability. Accountability is unethical if it's not preceded by support.

Once leaders start with clear and effective communication, then develop good relationships with those that they lead, and then provide them with strategies, training, and the resources to

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be successful, they've established a system of support.

The next step is to ensure that people actually do the work. I see a lot of leaders who are heavy on support and weak on accountability. If a leader wants to create a healthy culture, there is a very fine balancing act between support and accountability.

JSD: When you look at some of the evaluation systems that are being developed now, are you seeing that balance?

Muhammad: No. Some systems now assume that the teacher already knows how to perform well. Therefore, we're going to measure her into a better performance. If I'm trying to lose weight, developing a better scale is not the way to help me lose weight. The key to such systems is what they do with that feedback once they give it. So far, many leaders are more concerned about the measurement tools than what to do with the data that they see from those tools. You can't measure people into better performances.

Principals need an understanding of sociology and the talent and nature of human beings.

UNDERSTAND PEOPLE AND PEDAGOGY

JSD: What kind of learning is particularly important for principals themselves?

Muhammad: I would emphasize that principals need an understanding of sociology and the talent and nature of human beings. We can get so technical that we forget that, as a leader, we're responsible for leading human beings. The study of organizational theory is also important — how do we set up proper systems and understand that the system itself is its own entity?

It's becoming more and more important as we move forward that principals have a good grasp on pedagogy. You can't be an instructional leader if you don't know instruction. Walking in and evaluating somebody on something that you're not clear about — I would understand why a teacher would

question the validity of an evaluation by somebody who doesn't understand instruction.

JSD: What does it look like for leaders to learn alongside the other educators in a building?

Muhammad: Here's an example. Marc Johnson, who was named the American Association of School Administrators Superintendent of the Year in 2011, is from Sanger Unified School District in California. That district is in a very economically depressed area, and the schools made tremendous progress under his leadership. He makes a point to be present at all of the districtwide professional development sessions, and, many

times, he sits through a session repeatedly.

His presence and his participation send the message to teachers that this is something that we're going to make the cornerstone of our work. His presence is a testimony to that. It's very frustrating as a person who leads professional development to see leaders who busy themselves with something that isn't instructional work.

When a leader is not present in learning with his or her staff, it creates a disconnect between what the staff is being pushed to learn and what they see modeled by the administration. If administrators aren't learners, if they don't believe that they need to be present to

gain knowledge that they require their staff to gain, then it has an adverse effect on the implementation process.

Researchers say they haven't found a school that was effective that didn't have a strong instructional leader. When you're working as a principal in a building, you don't get a chance to see what people are doing in other regions or in other schools. How many administrators are still managers? They don't get their role as a learning leader.

EMBRACE SCHOLARSHIP

JSD: What are you most passionate about right now as you work with educators across the country?

Muhammad: It's time for principals and leaders and systems where students struggle to embrace scholarship. If leaders can engage their districts in scholarship and learning and understanding the needs of teachers and students, we won't have to see a superstar school that beats the odds.

I want leaders in urban districts under pressure to improve to understand that, for answers to the achievement issues that they are trying to solve, the resources are already there. If practitioners learn and get an understanding of better practice, they don't need a savior to come from outside. If teachers keep an intense focus on students' needs, study the work of people who've dedicated their lives to studying a particular dilemma, and try strategies that have worked, they would be engaging in action research and experimentation. We could then see unprecedented growth in urban areas.

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