

theme

EXPLORE THE STANDARDS
FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

LEADERSHIP

In her full essay exploring the Leadership standard in **Reach the Highest Standard in Professional Learning: Leadership,**



author Karen Seashore Louis offers keen insights into the question of how leaders affect the learning of other adults in a school.

She writes particularly about how “school leaders can create a school culture in which all adults see themselves as part of the larger enterprise of continuous learning” (Louis, Hord, & von Frank, in press).

This excerpt takes a close look at what leaders need to understand about how learners approach change and their role in helping create a culture that recognizes the humans at the heart of change.

A LEADER'S TOP TASK IS TO NURTURE TALENT

By Karen Seashore Louis

“Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death.”
— Albert Einstein

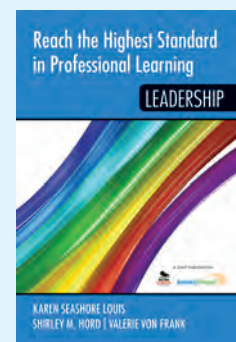
School leaders who take professional learning seriously recognize that they are in an important business: talent development. This is not a perspective that is typically taught during administrator preparation programs, nor is it a focus that one often associates with the perspectives of district human resources departments. Yet creating learning schools requires that we pay attention to cultivating a learning orientation among teachers, particularly if the individuals in those groups are not ready to engage in collective reflective practice. Teachers and other professionals have many talents, but they need to be assessed, honed, and shared if professional learning is to become a core feature of the school's culture.

Before we begin thinking about leadership and the human dimension, it is important to interrogate the images about teachers and professional learning that we bring with us (Firestone, 1980; Morgan, 1997). Paavola, Lipponen, & Hakkarainen (2004) propose three useful metaphors of learning that have implications for leading: acquisition, social participation, and knowledge creation.

ACQUISITION

For many years, critics bemoaned the weak links between research and practice and posited the cause as resistance to change among teachers which, coupled with lack of capacity, accounted for the poor performance of schools. A classic framework that challenged this assumption is the Concerns-Based Adoption

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students **requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.**



ABOUT THE BOOK

Louis, K.S., Hord, S.M., & von Frank, V. (in press).
Reach the highest standard in professional learning: Leadership. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Excerpted with permission.

Model (Hall & Hord, 1987; Hall & Hord, 2001), usually referred to as CBAM. What the authors proposed was a developmental approach that linked individual concerns (typically about lack of capacity) with “levels of use” that were related to increasing understanding and confidence as a result of acquiring knowledge through practice. The continuing relevance of the CBAM model lies in its implications for helping individual teachers acquire the knowledge and skills that support individual change (Anderson, 1997). School leaders need to understand where each teacher or smaller groups of teachers

are on easily measureable “stages of concern” about any change that is occurring and the degree to which they have access to information that might help them take next steps. As a practical tool for keeping track of major schoolwide innovations, it has weathered the test of time.

The limitation of CBAM is that it focuses on particular innovations, such as a new curriculum or instructional practice. In most schools today, the number of known new practices that are attempted simultaneously is mind-boggling, and this does not take into consideration all of the adjustments and in-

novations that occur among smaller groups. An organizational learning model suggests that improved practices may come from many sources — external requirements or programs, internal examination of student work, or new ideas that are brought into the school community because a few teachers have attended a workshop.

In other words, the learning environment faced by today’s school leaders is extremely complex. School leaders are not therapists. They have neither the time nor the training to address all of the factors in any teachers’ world that might make them more or less likely to pay attention to learning opportunities. They must, however, as CBAM suggests, pay attention to what we know about willingness and capacity to learn.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Teachers who already feel good about their teaching are more open to learning about ways of getting even better (Camburn, 2010; De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015). Therein lies the problem for school leaders, who need to support those who are less secure in their teaching capacities rather than just hoping that the sprinters will encourage slower colleagues to catch up. An approach that presumes individual learning has been the norm but is being supplanted by views that focus on the importance of relationships in creating richer learning environments for those who need more support. In particular, informal networks of sharing matter a great deal (Resnick & Scherrer, 2012), and this can be easily modeled by school leaders through more casual interactions as well as through more planned professional learning.

Teacher learning occurs most frequently when there is modest dissonance between what the individual believes and some knowledge or information that is easily available — or a dynamic tension between the status quo and intentional change (Printy & Marks, 2006). In other words, the sprinters — those that are far ahead and highly innovative — do not usually inspire those who need the most help in using new ideas. In many schools, however, even short but regular conversations among teachers and administrators about their professional learning are associated with greater willingness to look at the relevance of someone else’s experience.

We know that teachers bring their experiences and beliefs about teaching into their initial jobs — and unless these are challenged, past mental models will determine future practice and learning (Senge, 2002). New ideas that challenge personal beliefs and values that are not well-articulated cause teachers to retreat before engaging with them. There is also ample evidence that many adults learn best by seeing, doing, and reflecting rather than by reading and listening. Nonthreatening networks that develop because teachers and leaders are encouraged (or even required) to observe other classrooms informally may have many positive effects — including an increased propensity to talk about and try new practices (Ing, 2010; Zepeda, 2009).

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We also know that teachers are more likely to take up new ideas if they can see their connection to existing frames. This is problematic because “there is little consensus both within and between subject fields about what teachers need to know or how they need to know it” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 387). In education, like other settings, effective leaders are involved in helping all members of a school community make sense of new ideas in the context of what is being done currently. In particular, when leaders directly or indirectly encourage teacher-to-teacher sharing, opportunities for creating consensus as well as challenging old beliefs increase (Gallucci, 2008; De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015).

Effective school leaders are also storytellers who consistently weave together a larger picture of the innovations that are taking place in the school and how they can fit together. Stories are particularly useful as ways of exploring differences while creating consensus — as long as they are not instructional in their focus, but open-ended and dialogic. Thus, for example, a school leader who tells a story about how another school has integrated a controversial idea but emphasizes the journey and struggle rather than the final victory opens up opportunities for teachers to discuss their own and a group journey. Leaders do not have to make up stories themselves, but can repeat stories that they hear from others to encourage reflection and discussion. When shared, stories have the power to solidify groups because they are a form of shared knowledge that conveys an understanding of “how the world works” or “how we do things around here” that does not demand a logical exposition or a handbook of rules.

KNOWLEDGE CREATION

We typically think of teachers as users of knowledge acquired through various professional learning opportunities, but it is important to remember that teachers also create new ideas and programs. A popular book such as *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* is, after all, a compilation of the effective teaching strategies that the author observed and not the result of a research project (Lemov, 2015). One of the most popular federally funded knowledge sharing programs of the 1970s through the 1990s

was the National Diffusion Network, where the knowledge base consisted of programs that were often developed by teachers. Today, teachers take advantage of social sharing sites like Pinterest and other online communities to share their work.

Effective school leaders often simply expect teachers to take on the role of knowledge creation and build this into their job-embedded professional development plans. Teacher knowledge creation goes beyond inventing new teaching strategies that work. Action research, carried out well, can generate energy for reform that moves beyond a few individual classrooms

(Paavola, Lipponen, & Hakkarainen, 2004). School leaders can encourage shared knowledge development (which obviously has more impact on the whole school than a brilliant teacher in a single classroom) with very small nonmonetary rewards — supporting a group’s trip to get more information, providing time to explain an action research project to the entire staff, or, as in the case of one school that I studied many years ago, supporting teachers in developing a local conference to showcase the results of teachers as inventors (Louis & Kruse, 1998).

Acknowledging the creative side of teaching does not privilege professional knowledge over research knowledge or data. All forms of knowledge are important to professional learning, but the well-established principle is that sustained, disciplined tinkering is central to creating a learning organization.

Continuous improvement models derived from industry require translation to be useful in schools (Detert, Louis, & Schroeder, 2001), but we must trust the collective capacity of teachers to address quality through shared invention.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

In the past, professional development was often confused with talent development, but the concepts are quite different. Professional development in schools has traditionally been synonymous with training (either orientation to or preparing for specific new skills) provided to individuals or work groups, often under the assumption that “a teacher is a teacher.” Talent development requires thinking more broadly about the human capital in the school, focusing on professional learning for each person and the group as a whole given where they are at any moment.

What does attention to the human side of professional learning mean for the broader question of developing a school’s capacity for improvement? First, there must be an architecture to any talent development model that acknowledges both individual and social characteristics of the teachers and other leaders in the school. The first step is, therefore, some diagnosis of the

capacities of the people who are already there, while the second step is coming to some agreement within the school on what kinds of talents are most important for moving forward. Then school leaders, along with others in the school, need to address designing recruitment and retention strategies, development approaches, and rewards that will help move the school forward. This requires understanding the differences that underlie the agreed-upon definitions of needed talent.

What newer teachers need is not usually the same as what more experienced teachers need — but they may have different kinds of expertise that each can contribute to the other. Any given department or grade-level team may have strong expertise in some areas, but may be weaker in others. Finally, groups may have greater or lesser capacities for working well together on professional learning, which means that one-size-fits-all may not work after an initial orientation.

Diagnosis points to the implied hierarchy in the perspective outlined above. Leaders cannot begin to support teachers as knowledge creators in a school where most of the teachers are relatively weak or are dispirited. The foundation, as indicated above, lies in increasing self-efficacy, which, in some cases, may initially rest on the school leader’s capacity to provide effective feedback that affirms what is important and what needs to be changed. This presumes instructional leadership capacity to model and coach, whether provided by the principal or others.

In a school where quite a few teachers have realistic and positive assessments of their capacity to improve, instructional leadership that helps to develop knowledge-sharing networks that focus on student learning may be most important. The value of networks lies in how frequently they are used to stimulate teachers to see and share ideas that create a more cohesive collective image of quality. Only schools that have established learning environments may be ready to encourage and support inventors.

But again — developing the human side also means paying a great deal of attention to the underlying architecture that supports effective professional learning. High teacher turnover, weak recruitment strategies, the absence of established ways of socializing new members, and a weak connection between individual professional learning goals and broader school improvement goals can undermine a learning culture very quickly. Management as well as leadership of the human side of the school still demands attention to create effective professional learning.

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