

CORE ROLES OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEARNING LEADERS

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Learning system designer

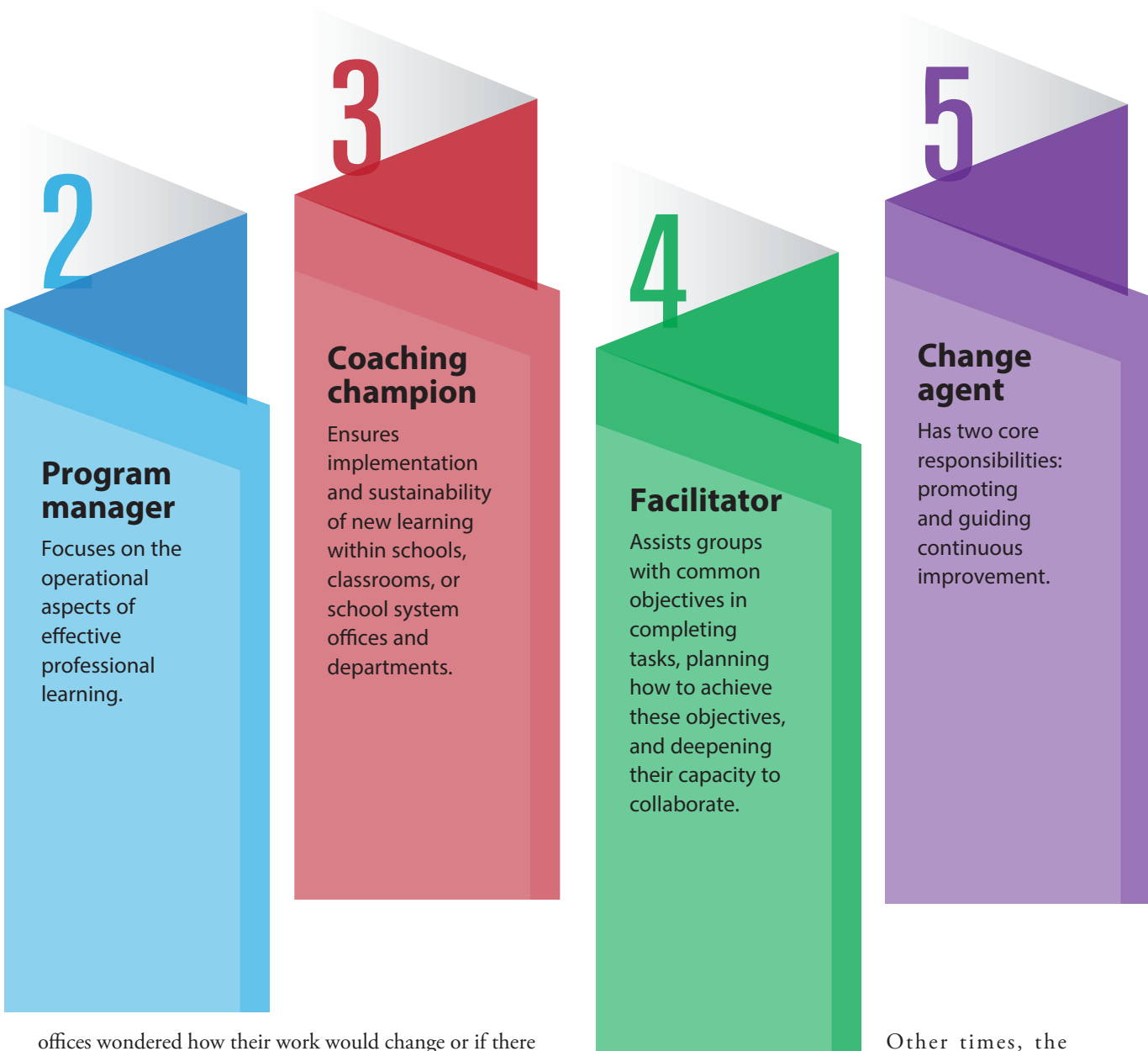
Facilitates the development of a district's comprehensive professional learning system.

By Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison

Nearly 20 years ago, we wrote an article titled “Multiple roles of staff developers” (Killion & Harrison, 1997). We found ourselves in conversations with colleagues like us who had assumed new roles and responsibilities for shaping a program of what we then called *staff development* with little guidance for those in central office who held the roles. Before writing that article, we studied our own work to examine what we did each day and collaborated with colleagues in similar roles to understand what the role of *staff developer* entailed.

Much has changed in the field of professional learning since then. Research shaped a new understanding of what professional learning is, and the responsibility and accountability for it is shifting from central office to school sites in which every educator assumes substantial responsibility for the effectiveness, design, and impact of professional learning.

Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and the accompanying Innovation Configuration maps (Learning Forward, 2012, 2013, 2014) place more agency and accountability for effective professional learning within schools in the hands of principals, teacher leaders, and teachers. When Learning Forward published a new definition of professional learning (Learning Forward, n.d.), many directors in central



offices wondered how their work would change or if there were still a need for the role of director of professional learning in central offices.

Amid this evolution, we have re-examined the role of central office director of professional learning to identify what are now the most essential roles for central office staff related to professional learning. Our continued intent in examining the work of central office professional learning leaders is to elevate the position to have positional and influential power in shaping, maintaining, and refining the district's comprehensive professional learning system.

This article presents five core roles, reduced from eight in our original work, that fall within the portfolio of central office professional learning leaders. Sometimes one person or office within a central office assumes this work.

Other times, the work is shared across multiple offices with someone serving as the coordinator of the various responsibilities.

Each district will naturally approach the responsibilities differently based on size and number of schools, number of initiatives involving professional learning, level of expertise of the central office staff and school leaders, and existing federal, state, and local policy.

Regardless of how the responsibilities are allocated, leaders within each district periodically assess the efficiency and effectiveness with which the work is accomplished and make necessary adjustments to maintain the highest-quality professional learning focused on increasing educator effectiveness and student success.

NEW ROLES

Five core roles emerge for district leaders related to professional learning. They are: **learning system designer, program manager, coaching champion, facilitator, and change agent.** The roles overlap and interconnect, making it somewhat artificial to separate them.

The reduced number of roles reflects the shift from a central office-driven, one-size-fits-all, top-down approach to professional learning that existed 20 years ago to a school- and team-based, collaborative, personalized, just-in-time approach to professional learning aligned with educator performance and student outcome standards.

The streamlined roles do not diminish the significance of central office leadership for professional learning, yet they shift those responsibilities to be deeper and more focused on supporting professional learning as it is integrated into the routine work of educators within schools.

Here are the new roles and their core responsibilities and challenges.

LEARNING SYSTEM DESIGNER

Creating a districtwide system for professional learning that embodies the vision and standards for high-quality professional learning is the primary responsibility for learning system designers. The learning system designer facilitates the development of a district's comprehensive professional learning system that includes the conceptual and operational components (Killion, 2013) to create and support effective professional learning for all employees within the district. The program manager then oversees the implementation and operation of the professional learning system.

◆ CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

The learning system designer serves as an advocate for effective professional learning and supports leaders in central office departments and schools to use the professional learning system to design and implement initiatives involving professional learning.

Most innovations, whether in new instructional practices or curriculum, student assessments, financial services software, safety and risk management, or leadership development, require building capacity among employees to implement new practices effectively. Learning system designers ensure that each initiative adheres to the vision and standards for high-quality professional learning.

To be successful as designers of learning experiences, professional learning directors must know and be able to apply the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), which define the attributes of effective professional learning. In addition, the learning system designer needs to know about and be able to apply a variety of professional learning approaches

(such as online, face-to-face, or blended learning) and designs (such as flipped learning, training, classroom observation, professional learning communities, instructional rounds, and coaching, among others) that are appropriate to the phase of the learning process, the desired outcomes, the learners, and the context.

The learning system designer must also have the skills necessary to assist others in developing the expertise to use the approaches and designs to plan and execute effective learning experiences and support transfer to practice.

A significant part of this role is being an effective presenter and facilitator of learning. Being a trainer and learning facilitator are highly visible situations in which the professional learning leader is “on the stage.” The professional learning director who conducts or facilitates successful training, however, spends as much or more time behind the scenes preparing learning experiences that integrate research on human learning and change. To plan professional learning, learning designers apply the backward planning model that includes:

1. Analyses of student, educator, and system data to develop educator outcomes;
2. Selection of appropriate approaches and designs to achieve the desired outcomes;
3. Sufficient support for implementation; and
4. Evaluation of the learning experience, the results, and the return on investment.

The learning designer assesses participants' needs, designs learning experiences to meet those needs, creates a plan that honors learning theory and research, supports implementation of the learning, and adjusts the instruction and learning environment to ensure success.

The professional learning leader uses content analysis and instructional practices to engage learners and optimize learning while building rapport with learners, monitoring participants' responses to adjust the design or delivery, and evaluating learners' progress and success. Designers must constantly update their understanding of content and pedagogy appropriate for working with adult learners.

◆ CHALLENGES

Learning system designers face large and small challenges. A large-scale challenge is gaining commitment from school system leaders to develop a comprehensive professional learning system that serves as the framework for all professional learning within the district.

Until recently, professional learning has not been viewed as an essential vehicle for improving student success and educator practice, and school systems have not sufficiently tracked, monitored, or evaluated the effectiveness of their professional learning efforts. Now, however, new federal policy within the Every Student Succeeds Act elevates the significance of accountability for effective professional learning.

As a designer and trainer, the professional learning director faces the challenge of simultaneously being an expert and a learner. As an expert, the professional learning leader maintains thorough, in-depth content knowledge and persistent attention to new and emerging knowledge and research about learning theories and models. The leader seeks deep understanding about the learners, their motivation, and generational learning preferences. She uses various data sources and methods to assess learning and applies technology to enhance learning and sustain support for implementation of learning.

One challenge for the learning system designer is building the leadership capacity of other administrators and teacher leaders to apply effective professional learning principles within their work. This requires constant attention to coherence within the system and walking the delicate line between monitoring and coaching others as they lead and facilitate professional learning.

PROGRAM MANAGER

School systems organize around two key bodies of work that support continuous improvement: operations and innovations. These two parts of the whole support school systems both to maintain the daily work of managing the system and continuously examine and implement improvement efforts.

The professional learning leader in the role of program manager focuses on the operational aspects of effective professional learning to ensure that routine professional learning services are efficient and effective. He also ensures that innovations dependent on professional learning for their success adhere to the school system's vision and standards for high-quality professional learning.

With smooth, efficient operations, the vision for high-quality professional learning is realized and aligned with federal, state, and local policy, and opportunities for learning are easy to access, monitor, assess, measure, and improve.

◆ CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

In this role, the professional learning leader is responsible for maintaining and improving the comprehensive professional learning system within the school system. This system includes a clear vision, professional learning standards, definition, assumptions, and well-orchestrated operational processes that include roles and responsibilities, decision-making authority, ongoing evaluation, and resource management (Killion, 2013).

The program manager leverages an in-depth understanding of the policy, research, and emerging trends to adapt and adjust the school system's professional learning services and shares this information with those who shape professional learning in schools and other departments. The program manager provides the leadership and coordination to manage the systemwide professional learning.

Within this role are coordination and supervision of specific programs designed to support staff — such as those for aspiring administrators, novices within induction and mentoring programs, school improvement facilitators, or instructional coaches — or implementation of new initiatives, such as curriculum or instructional improvements and school-university partnerships.

Program managers are responsible for effective, strategic, and equitable use of resources, including budgets and staff, and supporting and supervising personnel who serve in the role of central office professional learning staff, such as trainers, learning facilitators, or coaches.

Program managers are also responsible for aligning services to designated high priorities within the school system, managing data and information, and employing a variety of technology-based learning tools to meet the unique needs of individual educators.

Evaluating the systemwide effectiveness of the professional learning and assisting other leaders, including leadership teams at schools, to evaluate the effectiveness of local, school-based professional learning is essential for this role.

In addition, program managers are attuned to changes in the research and landscape within which they work. They stay abreast of current information and collaborate with colleagues and school leaders to analyze emerging trends and information to understand how they might be integrated into current professional learning practices, policies, and procedures. They use data from ongoing assessments and evaluation of the opportunity for, efficiency and effectiveness of, and return on investments in professional learning to adjust the comprehensive professional learning system.

To succeed with this extensive role, program managers depend on a skill set that includes project management, delegation, communication, analysis, assessment and program evaluation, resource management, advocacy, shared decision making, and personnel management, coaching, and supervision.

◆ CHALLENGES

The program manager faces a multitude of potential challenges and, if well-prepared, is able to avoid them altogether. Among the most complex challenges is managing a program without the benefit of a comprehensive professional learning system to support it. This leads to piecemeal decisions, inequities in services, and inefficiency in resource use. Another challenge is coordinating diverse initiatives and programs to ensure that all adhere to the vision and standards of the comprehensive professional learning system.

As responsibility and accountability for professional learning shift closer to the classroom and move to schools, maintaining quality requires diligent monitoring, ongoing development of leaders with primary responsibility for professional learning implementation, and continuous evaluation to have the necessary data to modify and adjust services and supports.

Other system issues — such as lack of sufficient resources, systemwide commitment to continuous professional learning, and fragmentation in oversight and authority for professional learning — become obstacles to effective professional learning. Multiple competing initiatives that work in isolation rather than in a coordinated way create strain on resources and cause a lack of focus and purpose.

To avoid these challenges, the program manager is an advocate for the comprehensive professional learning system, a teacher about effective professional learning, and a supportive colleague who coaches those with more direct responsibility for facilitating and implementing professional learning. This role requires the professional learning leader to develop relational trust with school leadership teams that fosters building their capacity to become leaders of professional learning.

COACHING CHAMPION

Coaching is an essential component of any professional learning system. The hard work of implementing new learning requires onsite and job-specific coaching over a sustained period of time.

Research from nearly four decades reinforces that coaching dramatically accelerates application of new learning in authentic work situations to solve problems related to practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Misty Sailors and Larry Price (2010) found that teachers who received classroom coaching following workshop professional development outperformed teachers receiving only the workshop on all measures of teacher observation and student achievement.

The coaching champion ensures implementation and sustainability of new learning within schools, classrooms, or school system offices and departments, often a major oversight of many initiatives' implementation efforts. The coaching champion serves as a thought partner, technical and expert coach, and motivator through differentiated, personalized, sustained supports that create a positive return on the investment in any learning-focused endeavor.

◆ CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

Coaching champions have three major responsibilities: advocating for providing implementation support through coaching, coordinating coaching programs that support individuals and teams within schools and departments as they implement new learning, and providing direct coaching to individuals and teams.

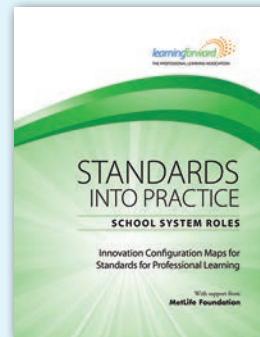
As an advocate, the coaching champion addresses three aspects of effective coaching programs. The first is serving as a spokesperson for the integration of coaching within every initiative dependent on professional learning to refine, extend, and improve practice. The second is preparing those who provide coaching supports in roles such as mentors, teacher leaders,

LEARN MORE

Standards Into Practice: School System Roles: Innovation Configuration Maps for Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2013) highlights the actions of learning leaders in four role groups: central office, director of professional learning, superintendent, and school board.

School system staff are responsible for coordinating systemwide programs, professional learning, and resources needed to help each school achieve its goals for student achievement.

The book includes IC maps to make explicit how specific educators contribute to deep standards implementation, as well as introductory material that explains the concept and use of IC maps and their application to professional learning. Available at www.learningforward.org/bookstore.



principal coaches, instructional facilitators, and content-specific coaches. A third is sustaining and adapting coaching to address emerging needs.

Coaching champions coordinate and oversee specific coaching programs, such as instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and principal mentors. Once the coaching champion facilitates and contributes to the design of coaching programs in collaboration with others, the coaching champion serves as the coaching program manager, ensuring that the values, principles, and practices that undergird the coaching program are faithfully implemented and that the necessary supports and resources are available to guarantee the success of the coaching program. Another responsibility of coaching champions is continuously refining or adapting the coaching program so that it reflects emerging needs and trends.

The third key responsibility of coaching champions is providing direct coaching services to central office colleagues, principals, school leadership teams, teacher leaders, or other coaches. Being committed to providing coaching through onsite support as part of any initiative ensures a higher level of implementation and sustainability. As a part of this responsibility, the coaching champion, like other leaders throughout the school system, participates in coaching to improve his or her own practice and impact.

Central office professional learning leaders apply the values of a coach and excellent coaching skills, such as clear communication, deep listening, and probing for metacognition. Facili-

tating the feedback process and posing multilevel questions in their work with individuals and teams both in central office and schools ensure that coaching has the desired impact on learning. Modeling effective coaching practices and engaging in coaching are visible ways coaching champions acknowledge the value of implementation support.

◆ CHALLENGES

Coaching champions, like all coaches, face a number of challenges. The first is making coaching a priority and finding the time to both coach and engage in coaching. Another challenge is helping colleagues recognize the necessity of implementation support that is personalized, sustained, and focused on the salient practices associated with new initiatives.

A third challenge is building and maintaining coaching competencies in others. It is easy to fall back into comfortable habits and practices, such as giving advice rather than coaching, if new skills are not sufficiently maintained. Coaching is not exempt from this challenge. Coaching champions allocate time and facilitate opportunities for all who provide coaching to practice, refine, and maintain their skillfulness as coaches.

FACILITATOR

Central office professional learning leaders serve as facilitators who assist groups with common objectives in completing tasks, planning how to achieve these objectives, and deepening their capacity to collaborate. School systems committed to distributing leadership often bring together teams of representatives to engage in decision making about strategy and tactics to achieve desired goals. Skillful facilitators support all types of teams to accomplish their work effectively and efficiently by guiding them with process or task support or both.

◆ CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

The two primary responsibilities of a facilitator, often combined, are to serve as a task or process facilitator. A *task* facilitator orchestrates a project or assists a group in completing a defined task by mapping out the steps and providing the tools and resources that allow group members to accomplish the work rather than directing them to achieve what someone else wishes. This significantly increases the group's ownership and sense of responsibility and accountability for the success of the work.

A *process* facilitator focuses on the quality of interactions among group members, supporting them to identify their assumptions and creating a safe space for them to speak their truths, have difficult conversations, manage conflicts, monitor self-interests, and build trust among members. Process facilitation helps build a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility. Often a facilitator provides both task and process support to teams.

The goal of the central office professional learning leader as a facilitator is to ensure that the group achieves its desired outcomes, whether those desired outcomes are about relationships or tasks. Task facilitators are responsible for initiating the group, working with the group to determine how to accomplish its task, and reaching closure with the group.

Unlike a committee chair, supervisor, or director, the central office professional learning leader in the role of a facilitator holds no vested interest in or bias about the group's outcome, other than it meets its defined purpose. A facilitator may not necessarily have expertise in the content of the group's work, yet he or she does have substantial expertise in group process, meeting planning, task clarification, and monitoring the progress of the work. The facilitator also has a wealth of practical processes to use to advance the group's work.

Process facilitators help groups with collaboration, communication, and conflict. Process facilitators work to create a productive, healthy, and safe environment for open and honest interaction among participants. They also help individual members identify and adjust behaviors that interfere with relationships and productivity. Process facilitators focus primarily on relationships and how they support or interfere with the team's productivity. In most instances, central office professional learning leaders assume both task and process facilitation simultaneously.

Facilitators draw from a wide repertoire of processes, tactics, and strategies. They help groups clarify their purpose and task; gather, organize, analyze, and evaluate needed data; determine a course of action; identify and solve problems; generate and evaluate solutions; make decisions; communicate with the larger community they represent; and assume responsibility for the outcome of the team's work.

They build community within the group by establishing norms or agreements about how members will work together, contract with the group about the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator, and clarify the group's purpose and nonpurpose. They may begin their work by structuring meetings, planning agendas, and preparing written notes about the meeting, gradually releasing responsibility to group members over time.

Task facilitators also rely heavily on skills for organizing, listening, planning, anticipating, observing, making decisions, and intervening appropriately. The facilitator is careful to attend to what is happening in the group at the moment, focusing on the many dimensions of the group's work while making a constant stream of decisions about how to help the group take the next logical step.

◆ CHALLENGES

As a facilitator of either task or process — or both — the facilitator's chief responsibility and goal is to support rather than direct the group to reach its own outcome. Because facilitators remain neutral and unbiased, they may cross the line between

facilitator to director when a group is struggling.

Sometimes facilitators are stuck in the middle between the person who is the originator of the group's work and the group. This often happens when the facilitator, in seeking to understand the group's expectations, meets with the originator to help him or her clarify the purpose and expected outcomes of the group. As a result, the originator may expect the facilitator to be his or her advocate or spokesperson.

When a facilitator attempts to interpret for an outside party, the facilitator runs the risk of intentionally or unintentionally imparting a bias or interpretation that may differ from the originator's. This may require, for example, bringing in the superintendent responsible for defining the group's task and purpose to

interact directly with the group so that the group can ask clarifying questions until it fully understands its purpose, outcomes, expectations, parameters, and the scope of its decision-making authority.

Facilitators must be able to give nonjudgmental feedback and develop the group's capacity to handle its own relational issues over time. This includes walking the delicate balance between enabling the group by intervening too quickly or often or allowing the group to solve its own problems.

Facilitators model and teach group members salient communication and group process skills and use gradual release to decrease the group's dependency on the facilitator for productivity and relational issues.

Chief among the challenges for facilitators is maintaining neutrality. The facilitator must be especially careful to maintain a focus on facilitating the group rather than becoming involved with the task and on ensuring safety for every member of the group. Central office professional learning leaders who serve as facilitators often benefit from this work by cultivating and maintaining a high level of relational trust with all employee groups. In turn, this trust prompts greater desire for collaboration and requests for facilitation support.

CHANGE AGENT

All change, regardless of how large or small, depends on the capacity of humans to act in accordance with the change. This means that change requires learning new behaviors. Because continuous improvement requires continuous refinement of practice, it is dependent on learning. School systems then must become learning organizations that engage in learning to lead transformation to survive and excel in a rapidly changing environment.

A learning system needs a supportive learning environment

with concrete learning processes and practices and leadership that supports learning. According to Stephanie Hirsh, Kay Psencik, and Frederick Brown (2014), an effective education-based learning system:

1. Values adult learning as much as student learning;
2. Aligns practices to student learning outcomes;
3. Shares a collective commitment to continuous improvement;
4. Thrives on precise feedback;
5. Establishes conditions that scale and sustain effective teaching and learning;
6. Commits to innovation; and
7. Celebrates and honors success.

◆ CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

Change agents have two core responsibilities: promoting and guiding continuous improvement that includes gathering data in multiple forms and from multiple sources, analyzing it, reflecting on current practices, and initiating refinements and improvements to current practices.

Change agents commit to bringing members of the organization new perspectives, ideas, and suggestions to stimulate and provoke others to engage continuously in inquiry, assessment, analysis, and innovation for continuous improvement and results.

To fulfill these responsibilities, the professional learning leader exercises courage and is comfortable with ambiguity and dissonance. Success in this role depends on one's status within the organization as a respected and trusted leader. With the confidence of their peers, change agents are better able to listen deeply for what is unspoken and engage others in dialogue to examine the "truths" that shape what they say, think, and do.

They model continuous improvement in their own work by searching for ways to improve, seeking feedback by inviting critical friends to work with them, listening to suggestions for change, and viewing their work through the perspectives of their clients. They facilitate collaborative inquiry that leads to new practices, programs, or processes.

Change agents read avidly and widely within and outside the field of education to develop and maintain current research about individual and organization change and consider the implications for school system and school initiatives.

They leverage policies and resources to support change efforts, identify barriers to change, seek appropriate strategies for interrupting the barriers, advocate and facilitate continuous improvement efforts in all district functions, assess progress toward goals, and celebrate success. They network with colleagues in a variety of local and worldwide communities to inquire about others' approaches and perceptions regarding similar tasks or projects.

Change agents ask powerful questions in provocative, persistent, yet gentle ways that promote ruthless analysis and

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broad-based consideration of possibilities. Some questions they ask may include: How did our current practice come to be this way? Whose needs are being served by our current practices? What do our current practices convey to our community about what we value? What impact do our current practices have on student learning and meeting the needs of all students?

In addition, they use skills in needs assessment; data gathering, analysis, and interpretation; planning; evaluation; resource acquisition; and forecasting to plan, initiate, implement, and assess change efforts.

◆ CHALLENGES

Change agents face a number of challenges. One challenge is accepting that not every idea for change reaches fruition and not every change initiative succeeds. Skillful change agents help others ruthlessly examine their current practices and proposed changes and consider the positive and negative side effects before undertaking their course of action.

They understand that change is a long-term process and occurs most successfully when those responsible for implementing change have a significant voice in shaping the course of action related to the change and have the will, capacity, and resources to succeed. As a result, they advocate broad engagement and sufficient resources for all change initiatives.

Another challenge change agents face is walking the delicate line between top-down and bottom-up change, and they are able to adjust their practices to build willingness for change regardless of its source. Change agents understand the context within which change occurs and how the conditions and circumstances influence how to lead, facilitate, or support change. Sometimes the change agent plants seeds that will mature over time into a later change initiative or support others as they craft and take ownership of a change without directing their course.

Most challenging to change agents is being the person who intentionally disrupts the status quo by promoting inquiry and continuous improvement, seeking to understand and reshape mental models that interfere with achieving goals, and shifting the culture of a school system to one as a learning organization. Change agents boldly question, challenge, probe, and assess feasibility of both current practices and proposed change. While these bold actions may frustrate others, change agents do not shy away from these practices.

CATALYST FOR TRANSITION

Shifting the roles and responsibilities of central office professional learning leaders is not an indication of a less significant need for the position. Rather, it reflects the changes in the field of professional learning.

The new roles are possible only when concomitant changes in the roles of others occur. Principals and teacher leaders particularly are on deck to accept greater responsibility and accountability for designing, implementing, and evaluating

professional learning so that it more tightly aligns with school improvement efforts and student learning (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016).

The transition cannot be a light-switch change, but rather must occur over time through a thoughtful and deliberate process. As a result, the central office professional learning leader becomes the catalyst for the transition and taps into the five new roles to plan for and build the capacity of principals and teacher leaders to undertake their new responsibilities.

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