



A SYMPHONY OF SKILLS

HERE'S WHAT IT TAKES TO LEARN IN CONCERT WITH OTHERS

BY LYN SHARRATT AND BEATE PLANCHE

Skilled collaborative leaders are in high demand in schools, school systems, and districts worldwide. The success of schools as learning organizations hinges on how well people can work together as they seek to build collective capacity and problem solve to improve student outcomes.

As the Leadership standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning states, we need "skillful leaders who develop capacity,

advocate, and create support systems for professional learning" (Learning Forward, 2011). Collaborative learning has now emerged as the vital strategy for learning — both for staff and students.

According to a recent OECD education paper, schools that are learning organizations share these seven characteristics:

- Develop a shared vision centered on the learning of all students.
- Promote and support continuous professional

learning for all staff.

- Promote team learning and collaboration among all staff.
- Establish a culture of inquiry, exploration, and innovation.
- Embed systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning.
- Learn with and from the external environment and larger system.
- Model and grow learning leadership (Kools & Stoll, 2017, p. 10).



Building on these characteristics, we have reframed collaboration to be defined as “co-laboring”: While being responsible for their own learning, leaders also commit to being responsible and accountable to support each other in their learning. In so doing, they foster mutual interdependence and strong learning relationships.

Our research into how best to build, nurture, and sustain collaborative learning highlights key leadership dispositions, skills, and capacities (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). The word “leader” is a broad term that includes those with formal authority, such as principals and superintendents, as well those who may not have formal titles but who have significant influence, such as teacher leaders and instructional coaches. Formal and informal leaders who work together and measure their impact are essential to meet the needs of students and staff.

In our experience as school superintendents and educational consultants, district leaders cannot make assumptions about the

preparedness of their central office and school leaders. System or district leaders must assume responsibility for their own growth as much as individuals seeking advancement. Thus, two questions emerge: What kind of capabilities do collaborative leaders need to work together with others? And how do we nurture needed skills and dispositions so that *all* leaders can improve over time?

It is easier to define the *what* than the *how*. For example, a leader who wishes to engage others in collaborative inquiry as a learning approach would need to ensure that the learning team:

- Explores a needs-based focus determined from co-assessment of student work;
- Has a clear question of inquiry determined by analyzing student data;
- Co-constructs the operating norms for collaborative work;
- Investigates the knowledge and skills needed to change instructional practice;
- Determines first steps for

NEW VOCABULARY FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

The credibility of collaborative leaders includes “**knowledge-ability**” — having a deep understanding of high-impact classroom practice.

The authenticity of collaborative leaders includes “**mobilize-ability**” — focusing others on work through shared beliefs and understandings.

The integrity of collaborative leaders is demonstrated in “**sustain-ability**” — building safety, trust, and strong relationships.

The creativity of collaborative leaders is demonstrated in “**imagine-ability**” — encouraging innovation and an openness to possibilities.

The influence of collaborative leaders and team members is demonstrated in “**collabor-ability**” — using a co-learning approach to co-work.

Source: Sharratt & Fullan, 2012; Sharratt & Harild, 2015; Sharratt & Planche, 2016.

planning and rehearsal of a refined practice;

- Assesses the impact of new staff learning on student learning;
- Reflects on progress before considering next steps; and
- Continuously models expectations and monitors progress so refinement of practice can continue.

SKILLS FOR LEARNING LEADERS

The *how* of this work is where leadership capabilities come to the fore. These include:

Leaders need to know how to assess the conditions for collaborative learning. System and school leaders create the conditions for learning by their attitudes and actions. Have leaders articulated a clear vision and rationale for collaborative work? Have leaders positioned themselves as co-learners in the process? Have key influencers in the system and schools been invited to co-plan and co-lead the work? Have leaders considered how to mentor or coach those on the fringe of the work so they become engaged?

Leaders (both teacher leaders and formal leaders) need to be able to create safety in collaborative work. Safety builds trust and trust builds stronger working and learning relationships. The following quotes are examples from our research participants regarding the importance of building a collaborative learning culture:

“A culture of safety and risk-taking has been developed.”

“Mutual trust and respect are evident.”

“Individual contributions are valued and encouraged.”

“Staff are consulted as to what would assist them with collaborative work.”

“Leaders must be the motivating force to aid resistant teachers to incorporate collaborative learning in the

classroom.”

Leaders involved in the work need to develop and/or refine important knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan coined the terms leader “knowledge-ability,” “mobilize-ability,” and “sustain-ability” (2009, 2012). Sharratt and Gale Harild coined the term “imagine-ability” as being key to the development of innovative leaders (2015).

Based on our research and experience, we added the term “collabor-ability.” We have determined through our research that this leadership dimension is critical to leading collaborative learning and supporting the other abilities (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). (See text box on p. 27.)

For example, leaders with collabor-ability:

- **Establish and implement** norms and protocols for collaborative engagement;
- **Support** goals with ongoing scheduled time, resources, and time for reflection;
- **Project** a growth mindset by modeling a belief in the capacity of others to learn;
- **Model** responsibility and accountability for individual and collective learning;
- **Facilitate** the work by using learning protocols;
- **Empower** by including all voices in the work;
- **Articulate** a clear purpose for collaborative work;
- **Organize** time periods and schedules for collaborative work;
- **Reinforce** shared beliefs and understandings about student and staff success;
- **Build** consensus on what specific areas for collaborative learning stand out through the analysis of student data;

- **Research** high-impact practices;
- **Determine** clear learning intentions and their success criteria for learning through collaborative discourse and analysis; and
- **Solidify** a commitment to employing an inquiry approach to collaborative work.

Leaders need strong facilitation and communication skills for leading collaborative learning communities.

The Learning Communities standard of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) specifies learning communities that are “committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.” Facilitation and communication skills focus on strong communication and interpersonal interaction as well as effective collaborative processes. These skills include the ability to:

- **Articulate a vision** that brings life to the stated goals;
- **Listen respectfully to many voices**, some of which may be opposing;
- **Seek and ensure inclusivity** in representation around collaborative working tables;
- **Ask for help** and know when and **how to delegate**;
- **Give and accept advice** with sensitivity and diplomacy;
- **Probe for deeper understanding** through open-ended questions;
- **Clarify key points** for others;
- **Integrate the opinions of those who disagree** with the majority while redirecting focus as needed;
- **Take responsibility for the challenges** in collaborative work when needed;
- **Let others take the lead** once the work is underway;
- **Let others take the credit** to

spur on motivation;

- **Listen intently and restate** what was heard when needed;
- **Encourage those on the fringe of the work** to become more engaged;
- **Respond calmly** to frustration or anger;
- **Advocate with passion** to keep interest high;
- **Redirect the work** when needed;
- **Help groups reach consensus** when differences appear to stall the work;
- **Help self and others move** from expressing good intentions to taking accountable and purposeful action; and
- **Model and monitor** using a reflective feedback stance (adapted from Planche, 2017, 2004; Bens, 2012; Sharratt & Planche, 2016).

These skills become system and school leaders' success criteria — meant to be used as a reflective, self-assessment tool for ongoing growth in and refinement of impactful leadership practices.

HOW TO DEVELOP THESE SKILLS

We need to consider whether district and school leadership programs specify the kind of development in knowledge, skills, and dispositions outlined above. The pertinent leadership work becomes how to reframe leadership preparation to support aspiring leaders in developing and practicing these skills and dispositions so that their knowledge becomes grounded in collaborative practice. What are the processes needed?

Course work, workshops, case study scenarios, and video clips provide content knowledge; on-the-job practice, simulations, and reflective role-playing provide process knowledge; and



LEARNING WALKS AND TALKS

Learning walks and talks are a systematic, nonevaluative approach to knowing what is happening in classrooms and in the school. It is a collaborative, growth-promoting process.

Using a defined protocol, leaders walk into classrooms to listen and observe. (Learning walks and talks can include students and teachers, too, if appropriate.) Observers do not interrupt the lesson, and the walks take three to five minutes.

Walks focus on what students are learning and the level of challenge of the tasks in which students are engaged. Observers look for evidence of deconstructed learning goals and

clear co-constructed success criteria and descriptive feedback to students based on the success criteria.

Observers also look for evidence of professional learning in the school that aligns with the needs identified in student work.

The process of learning walks and talks includes five key questions for students:

1. What are you learning?
2. How are you doing?
3. How do you know?
4. How can you improve?
5. Where do you go for help?

Source: Sharratt & Fullan, 2012; Sharratt & Harild, 2015; Sharratt & Planche, 2016.

mentoring and side-by-side coaching provide important feedback to fuel progress.

Collaborative co-work puts theory into action and moves leaders from good intentions to purposeful practice. Often, it is the intentionality of specific learning and practice as well as ongoing reflection on learning that stand out as the missing components in preparation programs.

Research we shared in *Leading Collaborative Learning: Empowering Excellence* (2016) highlights that purposeful collaborative learning makes an impact on student achievement. For example, system leaders co-learning with school leaders in Parramatta

Diocese in Australia implemented three high-impact approaches that included the co-construction of data walls, case management meetings, and learning walks (Sharratt, in press) in every primary and secondary school in the diocese.

Their success is tangible, as Sharratt reports in her ongoing work with the diocese, which serves 55,000 students (Sharratt, in press). Students' average reading scores are one example. In all grades, 1-10, except for Year 8, students have improved and are performing above the expected norm set by the Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading Comprehension (PAT-R) assessment standards. (For

more detailed results, see www.australiaeducation.info/Tests/K12-Standardized-Tests/pat-r.html.)

System leaders Sue Walsh and Greg Whitby attribute this success to school leaders, teachers, and system support staff working together, with a focus on increasing all students' achievement, by fully implementing the three collaborative processes across their system with differentiated system supports as needed (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 83).

In addition, leaders engage in ongoing professional learning experiences called learning walks and talks (see box on p. 29). Clear direction setting, articulated expectations, support, and collaborative learning structures across the diocese are key to Parramatta's efforts (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 95).

In the Canadian province of Ontario, the Ministry of Education supported collaborative efforts by infusing tangible resources for collective capacity building initially in the area of literacy (Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p. 21). This includes opportunities for school leaders to collaborate with provincially assigned student achievement officers as critical supporters and friends. In addition, school boards received resources so that a certain number of days could be translated into professional learning opportunities.

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed and is still developing online curricular and leadership supports in the form of videos, monographs, and conversation resources so that superintendents and principals can engage with staff in the area of building collective capacity. There is an intentional co-learning stance expressed in many of the Ministry's publications, which reinforces a capacity-building effort rather than a punitive or judgmental approach.

Their efforts paid off. In 2007,

in almost 800 elementary schools in Ontario, 50% of grades 3 and 6 students were scoring below expected level in reading, writing, and mathematics on the standards-based provincial assessments. In 2016, just 63 of Ontario schools had similar proportions of students scoring below the expected provincial standard in reading, writing, and mathematics. These results demonstrate that enacting authentic collaboration at every level achieves sustained improvement in student outcomes (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013).

In another example, Ronfeldt and colleagues (2015) reported on a study involving more than 9,000 teachers in 336 Miami-Dade public schools in Florida that concluded that leader and teacher collaboration on assessment practices was predictive of student achievement gains in both reading and math.

Developing new leaders through co-learning and co-laboring processes, such as data walls, case management meetings, and learning walks and talks, strengthens the skills of all participants and benefits both staff and students. Ultimately, leading collaborative learning demands a commitment to investigative, reflective learning for all leaders. Growing the leaders we need depends on how we build their capacity and nurture their confidence to become co-learners.

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Lyn Sharratt (lyn@lynsharratt.com) is an author, education consultant, and coordinator of the doctoral internship program in educational administration for the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Beate Planche (bmplanche@gmail.com) is a sessional instructor of doctoral students studying educational leadership at Western University, an education consultant, and a director and chair of Learning Forward-Ontario. ■