

EVEN SUPERHEROES NEED HELP

PRINCIPALS WHO SHARE LEADERSHIP HAVE GREATER IMPACT
ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

BY MEL SUSSMAN

It's not clear exactly when school leaders first started wearing an "S" on their chests and began defiantly uttering the phrase, "I can do it all myself!" But after days, weeks, months, or even years of racing wildly from task to task, many a superhero principal has come to the stark realization that nothing could be further from the truth.

In most cases, principals who try to raise student achievement through their efforts alone find that they're not only physically and mentally exhausted, but that they've also lost the efficacy needed to succeed. What's worse, their students are likely to have fallen further and further behind, largely due to a mindset that is both outdated and misguided.

Just as it takes a village to raise a child, principals need a surrounding cast that is willing to not only support their efforts to raise student achievement, but also share the responsibility and accountability for making those efforts happen. Sharing leadership is not a program or a model. Rather, it's a culture that is enabled and sustained

through a principal's efforts to create and work with a leadership team focused on the achievement of all students.

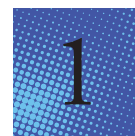
The creation of an instructional leadership team is more than just an interesting concept — it is a necessity for any school leader who wants to increase student achievement. This team carries out a variety of functions, but its major focus will be leading schoolwide instructional initiatives from beginning to end.

An initiative may be decided at the district level, or the principal may have the autonomy to choose one. Either way, the focus area should be determined by data-driven decision-making and by what students most need to learn. For example, a school with low reading scores may choose an initiative that focuses on *"increasing by 10% the number of students scoring proficient or above on the state reading assessment for the current school year."*

But merely creating a team that you want to focus on such initiatives won't necessarily make it so. A leadership team must possess the *capacity* to assist with

instructional leadership efforts. And a principal must understand that it is only through voluntary shared leadership and the incorporation of positional authority that he or she can ensure the team has the capacity to succeed.

So how does a principal make shared leadership a reality? Taking the following crucial steps — none of which can be bypassed or abbreviated — will ensure the success of a leadership team.



LOOK IN THE MIRROR.

1 Possibly the most difficult step for superhero principals is acknowledging that they cannot do it alone. It's imperative that these principals have a heart-to-heart conversation with themselves and accept that only through shared leadership will they have the greatest impact on increasing student achievement.

Giving up authority can be a gut-wrenching process, but when principals

come to understand that positional authority increases the potential for success, they can move forward with building a team that works.

However, this will only occur when the principal becomes secure with the following three premises:

- Leadership demands more than one person can provide.
- Shared leadership creates conditions for maximizing individual and collective strengths.
- Shared leadership requires that others assume responsibility and take action for the good of the whole.

When the school-level leader can accept relinquishing parts of his or her authority and comes to the realization that there is far greater strength in numbers, then the shared leadership process — rooted in the formation of a collectively efficacious instructional leadership team — can begin.

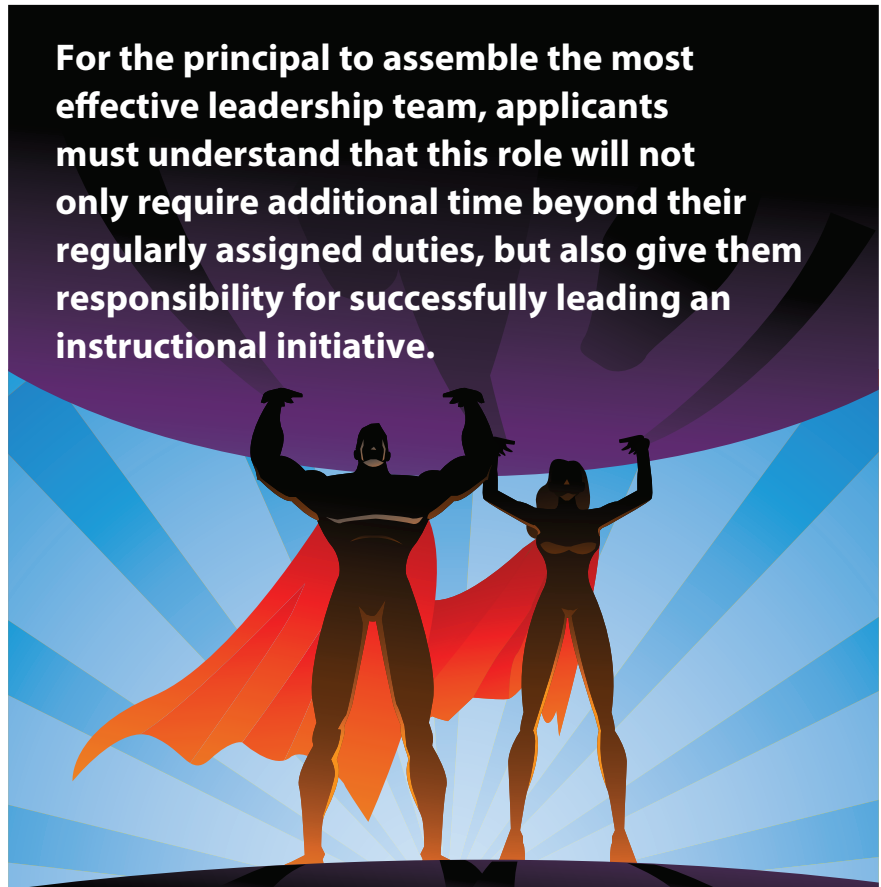
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START WITH A TEAM.

The principal must now try to build the strongest leadership team possible. This happens by communicating clearly to all potential leadership team members that they have the opportunity to participate on a newly constructed leadership team and what this team will be required to do.

This communication should extend beyond faculty members to all staff, parents, and potential applicants from the business community. One never knows where people with hidden talents may be found. Those who express an interest in applying for membership should be asked to submit a letter of interest that explains why they would like to be a part of the group and what strengths they could bring to the team.

The number of people chosen to be on the leadership team depends on the



size of the school. A larger staff creates the need for a larger team, whereas a smaller school will have to rely on fewer team members.

Because instructional initiatives are complex and principals have to let go of some of their control, it's important to note that the principals must also create an instructional leadership team that they're comfortable with and that they feel they can trust to provide outstanding assistance.

3

GATHER THE TALENT.

The principal should then interview all interested candidates and make sure that each applicant understands what his or her position on the team may entail as the initiatives progress. Applicants should understand that membership on the team is a one-

year appointment. This enables the principal to remove anyone from the team who is not carrying his or her share of the load and provides an out for those members who feel that they are not suited to continue. It also allows for new aspiring leaders to join the team.

For the principal to assemble the most effective leadership team, applicants must understand that this role will not only require additional time beyond their regularly assigned duties, but also give them responsibility for successfully leading an instructional initiative. This means increasing the quality of instruction and lowering the variability of instruction throughout the building for a particular content area. In other words, team members will need to understand the curriculum, instruction, and assessment involved with the specific content area, and they

will become increasingly involved with the implementation and assessment of that initiative.



GET ACQUAINTED.

Once the leadership team is in place, an initial meeting will help members get to know one another and share their perceptions about what the team should accomplish. Having an informal, open conversation sets a positive, optimistic tone for the group and allows members to talk candidly about themselves and the strengths they bring to the table.

We know that certain research-based practices have a significant effect on increasing student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Having team members take on tasks on the basis of their individual strengths increases the potential for success. For example, some team members may be more skilled than others in their abilities to communicate, build relationships, accept input, lead professional development, maintain an optimistic approach, or monitor and evaluate the initiative.

The principal should carefully take note of who offers these qualities and line up tasks accordingly. Above all, any tasks that members take on should be taken on *voluntarily*. Assigning responsibilities increases the pressure to succeed and may negatively affect the completion of the task.



UNDERSTAND THE INITIATIVE.

Once the team chooses an instructional initiative, the principal must ensure that all team members clearly understand the associated curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments. To gain this knowledge and adequately present the initiative to teachers, students, parents, and other

stakeholders in the community, the leadership team will need to participate in professional development. This reinforces the shared leadership concept and strengthens the potential for success.

For example, if a literacy initiative focusing on academic vocabulary is chosen, the principal may need to provide the leadership team with targeted professional development. Leadership team members will need to understand not only the content, but also the strategies teachers can use to increase student performance in that area. A school or district curriculum specialist typically can supply such professional development.

In addition, it would be strategic to have one or two members of the leadership team who are experts in the area of building academic vocabulary. Therefore, as new instructional initiatives emerge, the makeup of the leadership team could very well change from year to year.

The bottom line is this: The more people know about what you are asking them to do, the better the odds for achieving that objective.



CHOOSE A PIECE OF THE PIE.

Numerous leadership responsibilities and actions are necessary to implement an initiative successfully. However, because leadership teams vary in size and each individual has other responsibilities that may take priority over and above his or her team duties, team members must be cautious when determining just how many actions they will be able to undertake.

Research on school leadership has revealed that the following 11 roles and responsibilities of school leaders have an impact on an initiative:

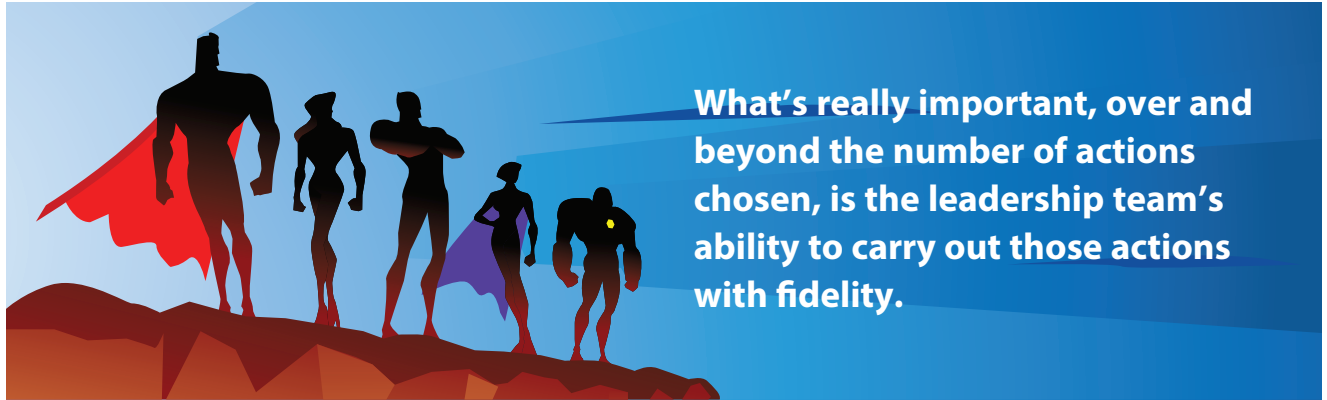
- Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment;

- Optimization: Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations;
- Intellectual stimulation: Makes sure staff is aware of and discusses new theories and practices;
- Change agent: Willingly and actively challenges the status quo;
- Monitoring/evaluating;
- Flexibility: Adapts behavior as necessary and is comfortable with dissent;
- Ideals/beliefs: Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling;
- Culture: Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation;
- Communication;
- Order; and
- Input: Involves others in decision making (Marzano et al., 2005).

Because most teams cannot fulfill all of these responsibilities at once, team members must strategize which actions they will focus on to most positively affect instruction and achievement. Again, principals should never assign specific actions — individual team members should choose them on the basis of their strengths.

Although some of these responsibilities will require extra planning, others are straightforward and quite doable — if, in fact, a team member possesses that strength. Consider, for example, the role of “optimizer.” Having the ability to inspire teachers and staff to accomplish things that might initially be beyond their grasp is key to the success of any instructional initiative. A leadership team member with this important skill can help the principal by going out into the building and spending time supporting instruction and teacher morale.

Or a team member with good input



What's really important, over and beyond the number of actions chosen, is the leadership team's ability to carry out those actions with fidelity.

skills, such as being a good listener, may take the time to get feedback on the initiative from various staff members. Having one or two individuals who possess this strength can make all the difference in helping individuals feel more connected with an initiative.

7

CREATE THE INSTRUCTIONAL TIMELINE.

Equally important as *what* is going to happen is *when* it's going to happen. Leadership actions do not all occur at the outset but rather are spread out over the course of an initiative. The recommended time frame is implementing actions every one to two months, which not only makes the team feel less overwhelmed about everything they need to do, but also allows them to focus on the present and makes tasks seem more doable.

Creating an instructional timeline involves simply laying out a monthly calendar for when events need to occur and, more important, who is responsible for ensuring they occur. It may take more than one leadership team member to carry out a task, which further emphasizes the importance of shared leadership and promotes accountability. This process is a team effort. Sharing the load is essential in the leadership team design.

Strategic actions might include

leading professional development; monitoring and evaluating the quality of instruction; determining and providing contingent rewards for outstanding teaching; checking student work to determine whether progress is occurring in all classrooms; offering consistent emotional support to teachers, students, and parents; and, above all, ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources to succeed.

The leadership team's creativity will determine the list of actions needed to support the success of the school's instructional initiative. The size of the team will determine just how many actions they can choose to implement. What's really important, over and beyond the number of actions chosen, is the leadership team's ability to carry out those actions with fidelity.

8

HOLD WEEKLY STAND-UP MEETINGS.

Accountability means everything when it comes to shared leadership. If each individual is not pulling his or her own weight, it can reduce the potential for success of any initiative, big or small. One way to ensure accountability is to have weekly stand-up meetings, which last no longer than 10 minutes.

During this time, each person briefly reports on how they are moving forward with the actions they

volunteered to implement. This is not to make team members feel good or bad about their accomplishments, but, rather, to push individual and group accountability and allow the team to see just where they are in the process and what adjustments they need to make.

This could very well mean that team members must modify their instructional timeline, add or subtract responsibilities, or even rethink their overall plan. The team must always remain flexible and willing to tweak the plan to achieve success.

Although principals are ultimately responsible for their schools' academic achievement, they will find greater, more long-lasting success if they share that responsibility with those who are able and willing to take it on. Building a team whose members all wear an "S" on their chests may be the most heroic and meaningful thing a principal can do to create a culture focused on better outcomes for all.

REFERENCE

Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B.A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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