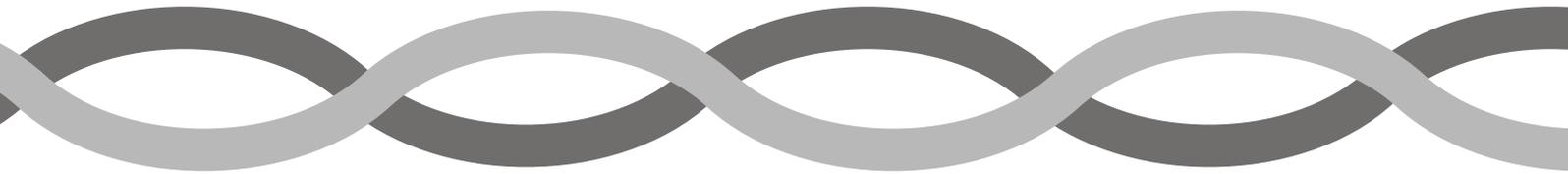


A NEW MODEL  
FOR SCHOOL  
CHANGE  
FOCUSES ON  
ADULT  
LEARNING

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# THE DNA OF DEVELOPMENT



BY ELEANOR DRAGO-SEVERSON AND JESSICA BLUM-DESTEFANO

**R**eflecting on what she felt was the most vital leadership work happening in her large urban district, an experienced superintendent recently announced at a professional learning event: “If we can get adult development right, we can change the world.”

Likewise, when the principal of a once-struggling school was asked about the secret behind her school’s dramatically improved test scores and teacher retention rates, her answer was simple: “Adult development. We’re doing adult development.”

So why all this talk about adult development? Aren’t schools — and development, for that matter — for students? The fact is, caring for adults’ internal development is one of the most powerful drivers of educational change. When the adults in schools have the personal and organizational support to grow, they

can bring their best selves to their students, families, and peers. This has important implications for cultivating school communities that are growth-enhancing, and it has also been linked to improved student achievement and outcomes (Donaldson, 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

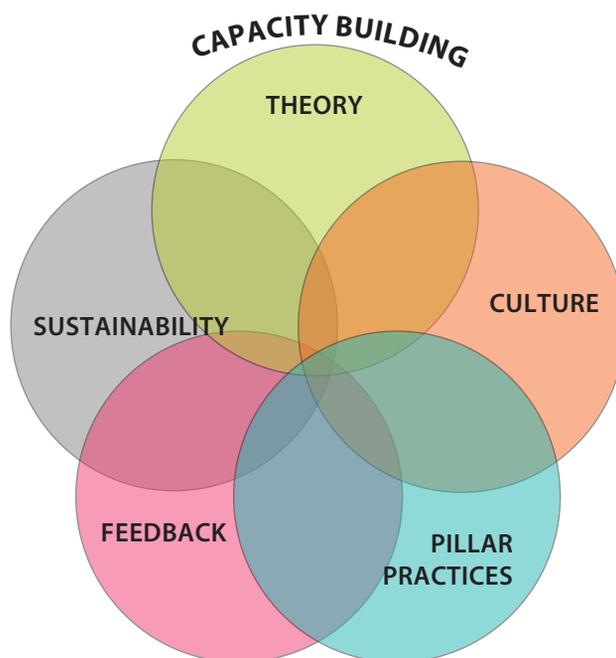
Nevertheless, it’s all too easy to

overlook adults’ learning and growth when we’re focused so urgently on that of students. This unintentional oversight is compounded by the influx of demands, initiatives, and opportunities that educators navigate daily. “I’ve been in education for nearly 30 years ... and have seen all kinds of big ideas come and go in my schools,”

one veteran principal told us. “But adult development was never on my radar until recently. I wish I could have learned more about how to support adults earlier in my career. It’s the missing link.”

So how can you support adults as they grow and learn, especially when educators already have so much on their overly full plates? And how might an understanding of what we call *developmental diversity* help education leaders do this even better?

In this article, we highlight key elements of our new model for developing educators’ capacities, as well as key



takeaways about the potential of supporting adult development (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018).

**FIVE ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY BUILDING**

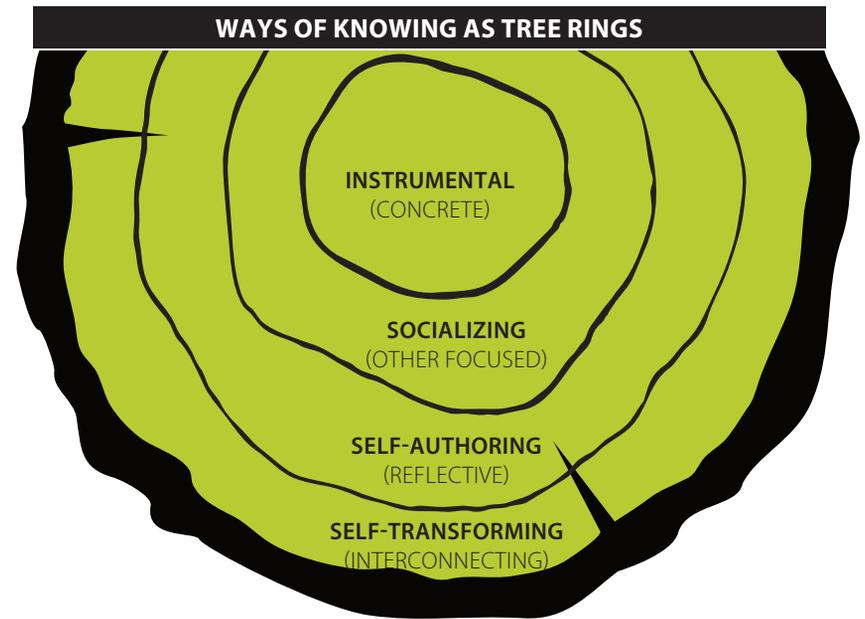
When we think about vibrant schools, districts, and classrooms, we think of people working to generate new ideas, deepen practice, collaborate more effectively, build bridges, and challenge assumptions — together. Of course, this isn't something we can do easily. Research suggests that it takes complex internal capacities to lead, teach, and collaborate in such rich ways (Drago-Severson, 2009; Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

In response to these pressing needs, our model highlights five elements of capacity building for school improvement: theory, culture, pillar practices, feedback, and sustainability (see the figure on p. 23). As suggested by the overlapping circles in the model, these elements, which we see as the building blocks or DNA of development, are powerful drivers of capacity building that enhance how we understand, feel about, talk to, and collaborate with one another.

**1. Theory**

Although a number of theories explore the patterns of development in adulthood, we have found constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 2000) particularly useful for understanding more about the different ways adults make sense of learning, teaching, and leading, as well as how to support their growth in schools.

In a nutshell, constructive-developmental theory emphasizes that each of us constructs our understandings of the world and our unique places in it. With the appropriate supports and challenges, these constructions can



develop, or grow more complex, over time. For example, educators at all levels — teachers, principals, assistant principals, and district leaders — can be committed to advancing social justice. However, they will orient to this differently and will need different developmental supports to see more deeply into themselves, others, and the systemic injustices in education and society.

Constructive-developmental theory sheds more light on these qualitative differences by highlighting four meaning-making systems in adulthood, which we call *ways of knowing*. These different ways of knowing — instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming — have their own strengths and limitations.

*Instrumental adults* understand things in concrete ways. They tend to meet their own needs or do what they see as the right thing.

*Socializing knowers* more fully understand others' feelings and perspectives but are often run by the opinions of valued others and authorities.

*Self-authoring adults* have

developed the capacity to reflect on their relationships and the world more broadly and author their own values and standards in response.

Like self-authoring adults, *self-transforming knowers* have their own internally generated beliefs, but they actively seek to explore and grow through continued interconnection with others.

Although one way of knowing isn't necessarily better than another or correlated with greater happiness or intelligence, these four ways of knowing represent a cumulative, developmental progression. Similar to the layered rings within a tree (see the figure above), each new way of knowing includes and builds on the capacities present in those before.

This is important because research suggests that leaders today need at least some degree of self-authorship to succeed in their work (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). An understanding of development can help leaders understand their own needs for growth as well as differentiate the supports and challenges they offer to the adults in their care.

Although there isn't a quick way to assess a colleague's (or one's own) way of knowing, understanding that adults in nearly any group, team, or school will demonstrate developmental diversity can help build and sustain a culture of support and care.

## 2. Culture

Feeling is tied to thinking and behavior. When something feels off in a school's culture, it's hard to move forward. Still, it can be difficult to pinpoint just what makes an organizational culture work. It's like trying to wrap your arms around the bubbles in a bubble bath.

That said, constructive-developmental theory can help us better understand the three preconditions of positive school culture: safety, trust, and respect (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013).

A developmental lens reminds us that adults, like students, will need different things to feel safe, trusted, and respected. An *instrumental knower* might appreciate clear expectations and consistent rules for all, whereas a *self-authoring knower* might feel more comfortable with professional autonomy and discretion.

Of course, many factors influence our preferences in these domains (such as personality, experience, cultural norms, and so on). Still, a developmental lens helps remind us that school culture can never be a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. As Deborah Meier (2002) once wrote, "Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish diversity" (p. 38).

While educators around the United States and the world are rightly working to honor the overlapping dimensions of diversity in their schools and classrooms — such as race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, immigration status, home language,

socioeconomic status, learning style, and more — a constructive-developmental lens can help school leaders see developmental diversity as another vital, if underrecognized, aspect of our identities, organizational culture, and collaboration.

## 3. Pillar practices

Because culture is, in many ways, a direct outcome of how we work together, and because how we work together, in turn, influences the larger culture, we emphasize four pillar practices for effective collaboration in our model: teaming, mentoring, providing adults with leadership roles, and collegial inquiry (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012).

Educators in our research often confide that, without this kind of purposefulness, collaboration can feel forced or too focused on superficial aspects of task completion or decision-making.

However, when educators are encouraged to approach collaboration as an opportunity to explore beliefs and assumptions, learn from diverse perspectives, and help one another grow, collaboration can be transformative. In fact, our research suggests that there are few things more powerful and predictive of change than genuine collaboration among colleagues who have one another's back — and who have the courage to share their honest thinking and feeling.

So how do we get there? For one, being upfront about our expectations as collaborators can circumvent many common challenges and create space for reciprocal growth. What, for instance, are we hoping to get from a collaborative experience? What strengths (and hopes for growth) do we bring to the group?

Likewise, sharing developmental theory with colleagues can help establish a common language for

discussing collaborative hopes and needs and can provide a road map for differentiating supports and challenges.

Thinking differently about *why* we collaborate is also key. When we approach teams, mentoring relationships, and leadership roles as ongoing opportunities for colleagues to grow with support (instead of just independently demonstrating competency or expertise), we can grow the capacity of the larger community over time.

The fourth pillar practice, collegial inquiry, is a form of reflective practice that can take place within each of the pillars. Although we can reflect privately on practice at any time, collegial inquiry involves at least one other adult.

Engaging in inquiry with others enables us to see our thoughts, actions, and selves from new perspectives, especially when we invest time upfront in setting norms that go beyond the basic agreements about timeliness and cellphone usage to tackle such issues as how the group will navigate and grow through conflict or what team members will do when things don't go well.

In sum, each pillar practice can serve as a developmental structure for growth and can improve collaboration and enhance organizational culture. (See p. 26 for some suggestions on how to implement the pillar practices.) As one veteran principal explained, "Putting the pillars in place in my school is the reason we've been able to accomplish what we once thought was impossible. These structures make the magic happen."

## 4. Feedback

The fourth element of our model for building capacity is feedback. Like collaboration, feedback is all around us — in our words, silences, actions, reactions, and inactions. Educators in our research refer to feedback as a "pain point" because they'd like to get even

better at this important dimension of communication and leadership.

Toward this end, we've outlined a research-based, developmental approach to feedback, which we call *feedback for growth* (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding and honoring all participants' ways of knowing during feedback conversations so new ideas can most effectively be offered, heard, and acted on.

A developmental approach to feedback involves recognizing that feedback receivers and givers will come to conversations with (sometimes unconscious) preferences and expectations. For example, *instrumental knowers* tend to prefer giving and receiving concrete feedback and directives, *socializing knowers* often favor positive feedback that doesn't threaten relationships, *self-authoring knowers* may appreciate feedback conversations that enable them to demonstrate competency and share best thinking, and *self-transforming knowers* often orient to feedback conversations as mutual exchanges of ideas.

Understanding these preferences can help leaders recognize their own strengths and areas for growth and enrich their feedback conversations with colleagues.

**5. Sustainability**

The final element of our model — sustainability — emphasizes the importance of renewal for individuals and organizations because the two are intertwined. As signaled by the high attrition rates for teachers and principals (see Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; School Leaders Network, 2014), many educators are making the difficult decision to leave the field early. As one first-year teacher explained: "I'm treading water and gasping for air all the time, but I'm still

DEVELOPMENTAL TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE PILLAR PRACTICES	
Pillar practice	Developmental tips
TEAMING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create time and space for team meetings.</li> <li>• Share hopes and expectations for collaboration.</li> <li>• Differentiate opportunities for participation.</li> </ul>
MENTORING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider the developmental match between mentor and mentee.</li> <li>• Discuss hopes, expectations, and feedback preferences (from both sides).</li> <li>• Establish confidentiality.</li> </ul>
PROVIDING LEADERSHIP ROLES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider the developmental match between the person and the role.</li> <li>• Offer private and open invitations.</li> <li>• Ask how you can help.</li> <li>• Remain available over time to offer support.</li> </ul>
COLLEGIAL INQUIRY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish norms and confidentiality agreements.</li> <li>• Start with small, safe topics.</li> <li>• Practice with the less personal first.</li> <li>• Model vulnerability and openness.</li> </ul>

sinking. I'm not sure how much more I have to give."

For school leaders, the task becomes looking beyond teachers' performance to their well-being and modeling a commitment to self-care. This often means clearly understanding how much teachers are taking on and prioritizing opportunities for meaningful professional learning.

This brings us back to where we began: the fact that we need to think developmentally about adults' thriving and growth, just as we do that of students. We need to embrace renewal as essential to individual sustainability. This will, in turn, make a big difference in the health and productivity of our schools and organizations.

**COMING FULL CIRCLE**

Focusing on these five elements of our developmental model for building capacity can foster growth in each of us

and in our most complex organizations. How we care for, understand, and relate to one another, whether we're talking about students or adults, is all connected. It all matters — and it all depends on the internal capacities we bring to the work. Adult development isn't just a great tool for school development. It *is* school development.

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