

LIFT AND LEAD

WHAT IT TAKES TO THRIVE AS A LEADER OF A TURNAROUND SCHOOL

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Leaders in turnaround schools have unique professional learning prospects and needs. The demands and scrutiny in turnaround schools may be more intense than in other schools, as the changes necessary to improve often require attention to and interrogation of many factors, including current leadership, teaching, and learning methods. Consequently, our work with leaders in turnaround schools has revealed the need for greater attention to the conscious development of resilience.

The Leadership and Inquiry for Turnaround (LIFT) initiative in Utah supports turnaround leaders' development and builds resilience and capacity of school leadership



Andrea Rorrer, director of the Utah Education Policy Center, addresses cohort leaders and leadership teams from schools identified as turnaround schools during the group's meeting at the University of Utah in July.

teams to thrive and lead their schools to improvement, even in the face of major challenges and adversity. Here is how professional learning can help mitigate the challenges of leading in a turnaround school through competence and confidence.

WHAT IS LIFT?

Turnaround school leaders include a spectrum of experience, including those newly selected and returning principals. They share the challenge of making significant improvements to teaching and learning in their schools.

To address this challenge, staff at the Utah Education Policy Center, in

partnership with WestEd, developed LIFT, a research-based professional learning network opportunity for turnaround leaders in Utah. LIFT participants come from diverse settings, including urban and rural, charter and traditional, and elementary and secondary schools.

Originally designed for principals, LIFT now includes school leaders and their teams, which typically include assistant principals, instructional coaches, and other teacher leaders.

Most LIFT participants have been meeting in a community of practice for the past three years, four times per year. In two-day quarterly meetings,

participants engage in collaborative experiences to facilitate, scaffold, and enhance their learning and professional growth.

Meetings include a range of learning and application experiences to deepen knowledge and skills in areas such as the Utah Education Policy Center’s leadership principles, effective instruction, data and research use, organizational leadership and change, and the Center on School Turnaround’s four domains of rapid improvement (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017), to name a few.

Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) serve as a foundation for LIFT, especially the Learning Designs standard. LIFT planning ensures that quarterly learning sessions include active engagement, modeling, reflection, application, and opportunities for self-assessment that support changes in knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for turnaround leaders.

We focus on leaders’ range of learning needs; explicit actions needed for learning transfer; tools and strategies for supporting implementation that include communication, feedback, and coaching; and assessments of participants’ understanding and application of learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

For example, an important skill for leaders is how to develop structures and processes for effective feedback to improve instructional practices. To address this need, identified through ongoing feedback from participants, LIFT provides multiple opportunities at the quarterly learning sessions for LIFT participants to learn about effective feedback practices, actively engage with their own and other school teams to practice techniques, and plan for how the feedback strategies will be implemented in their own schools.

LIFT also provides opportunities for participants to see the feedback strategies modeled, including structured protocols, to reflect on implementation

WHAT ARE TURNAROUND SCHOOLS?

Turnaround schools are those generally:

- Identified as low-performing in student achievement or other indicators (e.g. graduation rates) by state or federal accountability systems;
- Required to make significant, rapid improvements in student achievement; and
- Expected to maintain the growth and upward trajectory in achievement and performance for all students.

and identify areas for continued growth.

LIFT AND RESILIENCE

LIFT was premised on the belief that leaders can reclaim turnaround by engaging in building competence and confidence in self and others to improve and achieve effective practices that create conditions for success.

From our research, we have learned that reclaiming turnaround “requires understanding where schools are, what got them there, and the requisite need, or ‘why,’ for change, including how capacity schoolwide can occur in a systemic and systematic way. . . . A defining moment in reclaiming turnaround requires grappling with the organizational identity of a school and understanding the role of leaders in cultivating turnaround as an opportunity for improvement. To this end, an ability to first identify as a school in need of turnaround and then identify as a school capable of turnaround becomes a pivot point to reclaim turnaround as a leverage for change” (Park, Groth, Bradley, & Rorrer, 2018, p. 15).

Resilience requires more than the ability to hang in there or outlive a reform. It includes the ability to increase competence and thrive when faced with struggles (Gordon, 1995). To guide our work, we draw on London’s (1997) description of the five abilities associated with professional resilience, as they are essential for leaders who seek to reclaim school turnaround (Park et al., 2018):

1. Adapt to changing circumstances;

2. Welcome job and organizational changes;
3. Embrace working with new and different people;
4. Exhibit self-confidence; and
5. Exhibit willingness to take risks.

RESILIENCE AND COMPETENCE

We’ve learned that resilience and competence have a complex and interdependent relationship. In a turnaround setting, it is easy for competence to be described narrowly as raising student test scores.

We acknowledge that this is an important outcome. And we recognize that the ability to create conditions for success depends on resilience and competence. Here, we rely on harnessing the power that comes with understanding competence in the context of the stages of learning.

Noel Burch illuminated four stages of learning: unconscious incompetence (unawareness), conscious incompetence (awareness), conscious competence (learning), and unconscious competence (mastery) (Adams, n.d.). In LIFT, the goal is for leaders to move from nascent awareness of self and content to full-fledged practice integration.

Specifically, these stages of learning have served as an avenue to understanding where one is starting and how one can improve both cognitive and functional competence — the ability to both know what to do and capability to do it (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996).

LIFT intentionally attends to these competency stages throughout the learning experiences, including

opportunities for leaders to self-assess, build their competence in specific skills, dispositions, and knowledge, and bridge from current actions to actions that support their improvement goals.

Moreover, LIFT experiences allow leaders to develop the ability to adapt and modify their actions to be more effective within a shifting, and sometimes volatile, environment. Here are four examples of how LIFT learning experiences support leaders to be effective and resilient leaders.

● **Build confidence through competence and competence through learning.**

Often, we hear that what a leader needs to be more effective is more confidence. As noted previously, sometimes confidence occurs even where competence doesn't reside.

Through observations and feedback from participants, we have learned that resilience comes from feeling confident and self-assured in oneself to address challenges, and that, in turn, comes from competence and the ability to address challenges effectively.

LIFT's structure supports a leader's focus on the school's problem of practice. We use actionable strategies and tools, whole-group engagement, structured conversations with school teams, and facilitated conversations in differentiated learning hubs to develop and scaffold leaders' knowledge, skills, and application of effective leadership practice.

For example, the quarterly learning sessions dedicate time to continuous development of the leadership principles within the four domains of rapid improvement to expand participants' habits of practice for application in their own settings.

● **Cultivate a professional leader identity.**

Resilience requires embracing a professional leader identity. At LIFT, activities are intentionally designed to develop change leaders, where we encourage and support school leaders

to make choices with others that lead to improvement in teaching and learning.

Learning experiences build capacity to broaden perspectives and develop both individual and collective leadership identities. This includes developing the disposition, actions, and language of a learning leader who has the ability and capability to deal with ambiguity, gain new knowledge and skills, and promote active adult engagement.

Regardless of school conditions (e.g. uncertainty, unstructured school systems and procedures, fast-paced changing conditions, and low expectations for students' academic performance) before a participant's appointment as leader in a turnaround school or the designation of the school as turnaround, LIFT fosters the agency and action a leader may take.

Through ongoing participation, principals increasingly gained the competence and confidence as learning leaders who embraced ambiguity and systems thinking, gained knowledge from research and best practices, built the capacity to empower others, and used inquiry and reflection to foster collaborative learning.

● **Develop adaptive leaders.**

LIFT uses activities such as role-plays, cases, and consultancies to develop agile skills that are applicable in challenging environments. The role-plays and cases reflect the current problems of practice leaders face while supporting them to use the tools and strategies they are learning in LIFT to practice responses to real-life scenarios.

Individuals develop adaptive abilities to transform challenges to goals and outcomes. For example, participants build communication strategies where they identify common patterns of unproductive conversation and use moves to turn unproductive conversations into productive ones.

The System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction (Benjamin, Yeager, & Simon, 2012; Simon & Agazarian, 2000) provides a systematic, objective analysis of what makes conversations

ABOUT LIFT

To date, LIFT has been funded by the Utah State Board of Education, initially through enactment of legislation in 2015 that identified schools whose performance was in the bottom 3% according to the state's accountability system. These schools were given up to three years to improve student performance.

The first cohort of 26 turnaround schools was identified in fall 2015 and included both charters and traditional public schools. Many of these schools were previously or simultaneously identified as Title I priority or focus schools, as part of existing federal accountability policies.

Five additional school cohorts were identified in 2017 and eight more in 2019. All schools identified as turnaround are invited to participate in LIFT.

LIFT uses continuous planning, self-assessments, and improvement cycles, promotes active learning and engagement with models, and builds collective responsibility. LIFT's professional learning design is:

- Grounded in systems theory;
- Research-based and data-informed;
- Adult learning-centered and need-based;
- Focused on learning community;
- Collaboratively planned;
- Job-embedded;
- Scaffolded and sustained; and
- Aligned to professional learning, leader, and educator standards.

succeed or fail. Learning effective communication strategies that can be used across multiple contexts and settings increases a leader's ability to be agile and proactively maintain positive momentum with groups and teams.

School leaders have found the tool particularly helpful as they work to develop sound methods of effective, clear communication within their schools with multiple stakeholders.

● **Develop capacity to frame and message change.**

LIFT leaders have opportunities to develop their capacity to frame their turnaround efforts in ways that promote positive visions for student access, confront disbelief, and use evidence in continuous improvement cycles that takes time to implement over the long haul (Johnson, Uline, & Perez, 2017; Park, Daly, and Guerra, 2012).

Our partnership demonstrates that reclaiming turnaround is a process requiring leaders and their schools to understand where schools are, what got them there, and the requisite need, or why, for change, including how capacity schoolwide can occur in a systemic and systematic way (Park et al., 2018).

Through regular engagement in planning with tools and templates, as well as sharing with and receiving feedback from peers about successes, highlights, and areas needing momentum, LIFT leaders increase their ability to frame and message for change.

LEADING TURNAROUND

Without question, leading turnaround takes heart and soul. We have discovered that knowing what to do and how to do it is necessary but insufficient in turnaround schools.

Turnaround requires resilience — the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, embrace change, build self-confidence, and take the necessary risks (London, 1997) — to ensure that educators create conditions for all students to have access to an excellent and equitable educational experience.

Without question, leading turnaround takes heart and soul.

Professional resilience would benefit all school leaders. For now, though, we have learned that professional resilience permits leaders in turnaround schools to reclaim turnaround as “both a form of resistance to the deficit orientation it now holds and a form of empowerment” (Park et al., 2018, p. 29).

In an era marked by high turnover and hesitation to become or remain a leader of a turnaround school, professional learning — particularly opportunities for leaders to learn with and from others — is imperative. LIFT, which promotes individual learning within a collective community of practice, is one example of professional learning that promotes resilience and competence in tandem. Leaders who move from surviving to thriving in turnaround schools want and need this type of professional learning.

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