

3 STRANDS FORM STRONG SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

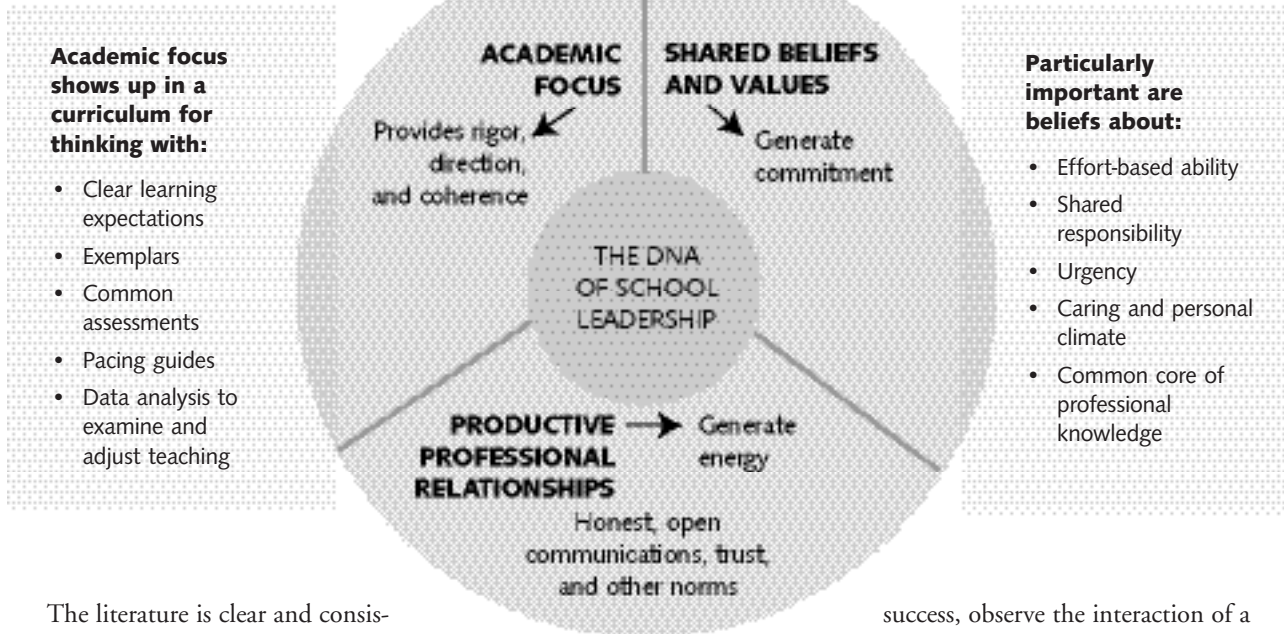
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If you go to a teacher team meeting and observe well, you can tell if a school is on the move.

Take a typical school district on a Tuesday. At the high school, the four teachers who teach 9th-grade algebra are meeting. Across town at Parker Elementary, the three 4th-grade teachers are having their 60-minute weekly meeting. Later in the day, the social studies team at the middle school will be meeting.

- What do they spend their time doing?
- What beliefs about students are revealed in their talk?
- How honestly and nondefensively do they deal with one another?

DNA of school leadership has three elements



The literature is clear and consistent that schools with strong organizational cultures produce the best results for children, especially children who are disadvantaged and behind grade level (see resources on p. 54).

Researchers have taken three different approaches to understand these successful cultures. The approaches look, depending on the authors' preferences, at shared beliefs, academic focus, or productive professional relationships. Together, these elements define a professional culture. Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995) find that all three are important. And it is almost certain that the more disadvantaged and diverse the students, the more important these features of the adult culture become.

Strong cultures work because they produce teachers who constantly improve teaching and learning throughout the school. Nothing is as important for student learning as the



individual teacher and what that person knows, believes, and can do. Schools with strong cultures produce more teaching expertise and better decision making by more teachers more of the time.

To see whether teachers in your school display traits in all three areas and operate synergistically for student

success, observe the interaction of a team of teachers that meets regularly, such as the 3rd-grade team, the middle school social studies teachers, the math teachers who teach freshman algebra, or any teams that share content.

Many other teams are important in the life of a successful school, but what happens in teams that share content is a reflection of the whole culture.

Building an improved professional culture is possible by developing leaders' capacities to work with teacher teams on shared beliefs, academic focus, and productive professional relationships.

(See diagram above.)

ACADEMIC FOCUS

Authors Mike Schmoker (1999), Rick DuFour, and Robert Eaker (1998), and others have written about the traits of "academic focus." The practices that exemplify academic focus are systematic, thorough, rigorous, efficient, data-oriented, and results-oriented.

An academic focus starts with having clear proficiency targets with criteria and exemplars that show, for example, what good 4th-grade writing

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looks like, what a good performance on the microscope lab in high school biology is, or what kind of a passage a student should be able to read and analyze at the end of 8th grade.

Starting from end-of-grade and end-of-course proficiencies such as the above, the team has clear benchmark performances along the way against which students can compare their current performance and which teachers can use to tune instruction and generate frequent feedback for students.

(These proficiency targets, of course, need to be aligned with state frameworks and high-stakes tests.)

In a school with academic focus, one sees all the teachers sharing with students the same models of work that exemplify the standards and, where appropriate, rubrics that discriminate different levels of perform-

ance relative to the standards. The same assessment tasks are used across classes or grade levels, and high school exams are the same from all teachers teaching the same subject.

Descriptions of “academic focus” have the ring of precision and systemization: “targets, benchmarks, assessments, feedback,” and they depend on good data. The elements of academic focus provide a common direction, enabling efficient and potent instruction.

Important practices of academic focus are:

1. A rigorous, thinking curriculum that is crystal clear because it includes:

- A compact list of clear learning expectations for each grade and subject or course ready to hand to

a newly hired teacher;

- Tangible exemplars of student proficiency for each learning expectation;
- “Power standards,” i.e. identification of the most important high leverage skills (Reeves, 2002);
- End-of-course/year common assessments with common standards;
- Common quarterly assessments;
- High-level thinking tasks and questions in all students’ learning experiences, regardless of academic skill level; and
- Pacing guides.

2. Systematic analysis of data and feedback mechanisms to students:

- Classroom systems for high-frequency, detailed feedback to stu-

Resources on professional community

- *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*, by John Goodlad. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.
- *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality*, by Fred M. Newmann and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- "Teacher learning: Implications of new views of cognition," by Ralph T. Putnam and Hilda Borko. In Bruce J. Biddle, Thomas L. Good, and Ivor Goodson (Eds.), *International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching*. Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997.
- "Effective schools: A review," by Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith. (1983, March). *The Elementary School Journal*, 83(4), 427-452.
- "Excellence in English in middle and high school: How teachers' professional lives support student achievement," by Judith A. Langer. (2000, Summer). *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 397-439.
- *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*, by Michale Rutter, Peter Mortimer, and Deborah Maugham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- "From aptitude to effort: A new foundation for our schools," by Lauren Resnick. (1995). *Daedalus*, 124(4), 55-62.
- "Good seeds grow in strong cultures," by Jon D. Saphier and Matt King. (1985, March). *Educational Leadership*, 42(6), 67-74.
- "Institute for Learning: Instruction and learning profile," by Lauren Resnick. Unpublished paper, University of Pittsburgh, 1997.
- "Integrating staff development and school improvement: A study of teacher personality and school climate," by David Hopkins. In Bruce Joyce (Ed.), *Changing School Culture Through Staff Development*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1990.
- "Leadership for large-scale improvement in American education," by Richard F. Elmore. (1999, September). Unpublished paper.
- *The New Structure of School Improvement*, by Bruce Joyce, Emily Calhoun, and David Hopkins. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999.
- "Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success," by Judith W. Little. (1982, Fall). *American Educational Research Journal*, 19(3), 325-340.
- "The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations," by Judith Warren Little. (1990). *Teachers College Record*, 91, 509-536.
- *Professionalism and Community*, by Karen Seashore Louis and Sharon D. Kruse. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1995.
- *Results: The Key to Continuous Improvement*, by Mike Schmoker. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1999.
- "The role of professional learning communities in international education," by J.C. Toole and Karen Seashore. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 2001.
- *School Matters: The Junior Years*, by Peter Mortimore, Pam Sammons, Louise Stoll, David Lewis, & Russell Ecob. London: Open Books, 1988.
- *Shaping School Culture*, by Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement, Community School District #2, New York City*, by Richard Elmore and Deanna Burney. (1997, August). Report for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- *Student Achievement Through Staff Development*, 2nd edition, by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers, 1995.
- *Successful School Restructuring*, by Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage. Madison, Wis.: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, 1995.
- *Teachers' Workplace: The Social Organization of Schools*, by Susan Rosenholtz. New York: Longman, 1989.
- "The work of leadership," by Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald L. Laurie. (2001, December 1). *Harvard Business Review* 79(11), 131-141.

dents that compare their work with work that meets standards and guides them on how to improve;

- Quarterly teacher team meetings to analyze student data from common assessments; and
- Weekly team meetings to improve instruction of skills and concepts

with which students are struggling.

At team meetings in high-functioning schools, teachers may often look at samples of student work generated in class during the week, seeking patterns of difficulty and sharing instructional approaches and strategies. Items from the list above will be

visible on the table.

Whatever It Takes (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004) is a handbook of strategies and structures for developing academic focus.

SHARED BELIEFS

Shared beliefs ripple out into individual teacher behavior, class routines,

procedures and practices, and adults' behavior with one another. They show up in school structures including schedules, grouping, and grading practices. They are evident in interactive teaching in very concrete and observable ways. They influence the spirit, the fiber, the character and commitment of the staff, allowing teachers to persist when the going gets tough with discouraged students or youngsters who are behind academically.

Shared beliefs are evident in team meetings, where they show up in dialogue. This is particularly true of the belief that all students are capable of working on rigorous material and meeting high standards, even if they currently are behind grade level: "I know they can do this. I've got to figure out some way to get Jimmy and Alphonse to work more effectively." Beliefs are embedded in remarks like: "Well, if I take your suggestion, that may get him over the top with common denominators. He just needs more time with it."

Shared beliefs can be heard embedded in dialogue during the flow or work in team meetings, not as a separate discussion about beliefs. Particularly important beliefs are:

- Ability is effort-based (i.e. smart is something you can get.). "Think you can; work hard; get smart" (Jeff Howard and Verna Ford, personal communication, 1990).
- Errors are normal and opportunities for learning. They are simply feedback that enables productive goal setting.
- Care, quality, and craftsmanship are what count, not speed or being first or fastest.
- Good students (and professional teachers) know how to ask for help and get feedback on their work.
- Climate counts. Students need to feel known, included, and valued for who they are, and feel they are

members of a cohesive, supportive community.

- Students' success is teachers' joint responsibility. When students succeed, teachers share credit and a sense of cumulative accomplishment.
- Improvement is urgently needed. "Our school can do a lot better for most of its students than it is doing now. Each child can succeed at an important task every day" (Schlechty, 2000).
- We must constantly explore professional knowledge about generic teaching and learning and content-specific pedagogy. A common core of knowledge exists and is huge, complex, and organized around repertoire and matching, not singular "effective" behaviors (Saphier & Gower, 1997).

How leaders can influence beliefs among faculty can be explored further in Chapter 5 of *On Common Ground* (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

PRODUCTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

"Relationships, relationships, relationships — it's all about relationships," Tony Alvarado said in his early days of leadership in New York's District 2. What characterizes these relationships?

In schools that grow teaching expertise, adults actively show these norms:

- Nondefensive self-examination of practice;
- Deprivatization of teaching practice with experimentation, collaboration, and group critiques;
- Equanimity, with conflict and disagreement viewed as robust, healthy professional dialogue;
- Ability to discuss the undiscussable;
- Willingness to hold each other accountable for agreed-upon norms and student results;
- Curiosity and constant learning

from the knowledge base on teaching and learning;

- Appreciation and recognition of others' accomplishments;
- Celebration, caring, humor;
- Traditions, rituals, and ceremonies bind adults into a community;
- Respect for others and confidence; and
- Willingness to ask for help.

These characteristics shape the environment for adults with, of course, perceivable consequences in the environment for children. It is an environment in which people feel safe yet challenged; where they feel a sense of belonging and ownership; where people look forward to going to work. This feeling is different from the passion and drive that come from shared beliefs, different from the precision and rigor that come from academic focus.

These relationship elements enable people to feel synergy and feel challenged. And these characteristics are more than feel-good traits.

They enable courageous conversations that maximize learning and continuous improvement of teaching expertise.

In our courses and development projects for administrators, we have found relationships to be so important that we start our programs there. Self-knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the skills for having courageous conversations in one's own daily life enable leaders to develop those same capacities in teams of teachers. Powerful communication is directly connected with a team's ability to improve instruction.

At teams meetings in high functioning schools, one hears dialogue that reflects the norms listed above.

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Team observers could write down dialogue and label in the margins where the norms occur:

- “I just can’t get my kids to write with voice. Karla, your kids are so good at that. I see the improvement since last month in the samples we’re looking at. What are you doing that gets these changes?”

(Asking for help; nondefensive self-examination.)

- “When we were in your room, you didn’t give Andy any clues when he was at the overhead and left off the corners counting the perimeter. What were your thoughts about what might happen?”

(Deprivatization of teaching practice.)

- “Why don’t you try that, and Marcia and I will observe while our kids are at music?”

(Deprivatization of practice.)

Once leaders are skilled in handling difficult conversations, they bring these skills to the teams they lead.

- “I don’t agree, Jim. I think you’ll get a better result with firm, swift consequences. He won’t take the contract seriously if he doesn’t know you mean business.”

(Robust dialogue — equanimity with disagreement.)

- “I’m feeling like an outsider in this conversation. You all are celebrating your results from last year, but my kids didn’t do nearly as well!”

(Discussing the undiscussable.)

HOW LEADERS BUILD PRODUCTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Conversations such as those cited are rare in school teams. Leaders and teachers have little preparation and training to cause it to be otherwise. Building more productive professional relationships is a frontier in staff development. We have been working to build this element into administrative certification programs in which we participate through a multiphase process.

Phase 1

In study groups, leaders discuss texts, including *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), *Primal Leadership* (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzer, 2002), *Nonviolent Communication* (Rosenberg, 2003), and *Talk Sense* (Jentz, 2005), to develop self-knowledge and skills for one-on-one situations where emotions may be high and conflict present. Important skills are:

- Understanding one’s own emotional profile — hot buttons and implicit messages from one’s past about how to behave in conflict situations;
- Identifying when one is climbing the ladder of inference and stopping;
- Identifying another’s feelings as well as one’s own in a difficult situation and bringing those feelings into the conversation;
- Exploring the other person’s story in a conflict situation;
- Sending “I” messages and making requests based on needs; and
- Regaining one’s equilibrium in stressful situations.

School leaders also must develop skills for resolving interpersonal conflicts, and for dealing with dysfunctional behavior and setting limits rather than negotiating. Negotiation is not always the appropriate path for a leader. These skills can be developed in staff development settings where leaders work together to practice the skills and use each other as resources for feedback and support.

A facilitator makes it safe for participants to experiment with new behaviors with each other, discuss real cases with confidence that confidentiality will be maintained, and make themselves vulnerable in front of peers. This is no simple task, but is essential.

Phase 2

Once leaders are skilled in handling difficult conversations, they bring these skills to the teams they lead. For a principal, this may be the building’s Instructional Leadership Team. The leader then focuses on:

- Learning how to structure discussions for maximum participation and interaction (e.g. “The World Café” structure: See From the Toolbox in the Winter 2006 *JSD*, 27(1), 65.);
- Using interaction skills to make it safe for participants to say what is on their minds;
- Using temperate language;
- Balancing advocacy and inquiry; and
- Making reasoning and intentions explicit, and surfacing those of participants.

Phase 3

The final phase of the work is teaching the information to fellow leaders and challenging them to bring it to their practice in the teams they lead. The leader then functions as teacher and as staff developer for peers.

These phases may overlap, and there are other ways to achieve the same goals.

The requirement is only that there must be some explicit plan, because these skills are not common in the workplace, yet are pivotal for developing effective teams.

High-functioning teams are able to make the undiscussable discussable — such as examining data about student achievement when some teachers on the team have done better than others.

Underlying all the skills in this developmental sequence are attitudes that improve all one’s relationships:

- Mindfulness (self-awareness);
- Curiosity;
- Awareness that feelings are everywhere, in any situation;

- Humility; (“Hold your clarity as if it were an accident.” — *Castenada*)
- Courage to take risks.

SUMMARY

The team is the window on the soul of the school. To know how poised a school is to help students make gains, sit in on a grade-level or subject-specific team meeting. Are teachers spending time on items related to academic focus? Does their talk reflect real belief in the students and shared responsibility? Can they engage one another in honest, nondefensive dialogue? If the answer is yes, then “Katie, bar the door!” This school is going somewhere!

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group wise / ROBERT J. GARMSTON

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people may not have run out of gas during traffic jams along the escape route, and materials for survival might have been delivered in a more timely manner.

Here is how to use a Futures Wheel (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) for an environmental impact study.

1. Write the name of the event or program in the center of the wheel.
2. Work outward to the first layer of circles. Describe two negatives and two positives, making the ideas as divergent as possible.
3. Proceed to the second layer. For each negative and each positive, write a positive and negative effect.
4. Proceed to the next level. Surprises often occur here. A faculty in Idaho reached this layer in studying the adop-

tion of a new reading program and realized they were stuck, unable to identify another set of positives and negatives. They reasoned that if they didn't know, perhaps students would. They asked students for their perceptions and came to new understandings about how they could make this program valuable to students.

Keep in mind that the Futures Wheel is not a predictor of events. Rather, it reveals possible consequences that can be taken into account when planning a program. Educators need not live passively at the end of a pipeline of change. They can test changes for congruence with best practices, and if found wanting, modify how new initiatives are implemented.

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