



# From survival to opportunity

## 3 LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES ALLOW SCHOOLS TO THRIVE DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

BY JENNIFER AHN AND ELIZABETH SHAFER

**A**s schools grapple with the daunting challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, some leaders are galvanizing their staff to maintain focus on instruction, while others are overwhelmed by the operational logistics of constant change. What makes the difference? And what types of support can help struggling leaders to thrive despite the challenges?

Through our work at Lead by Learning, a nonprofit organization of Mills College's School of Education that partners with schools and districts to provide educator professional

learning, we have identified three essential capacities that are key to school leaders' ability to lead effectively through change. These capacities are learner, partner, and visionary.

These capacities emerged primarily through working with two large urban school districts in the San Francisco, California, Bay Area: West Contra Costa Unified and Oakland Unified. Throughout the pandemic, we worked with these districts, coaching leaders and working with their teachers, working with and observing principal communities of practice, interviewing principals, talking to teachers about

high-impact leadership moves from their principals, and talking to district leaders about effective school leadership.

### THE LEARNER

At the heart of change is learning. This may seem obvious, but we frequently forget this when we are swept away by the urgency to change, especially to address vital issues like inequity. Action is important. But when we don't pause to learn — to examine what is going on around us and make sense of what teachers, students, and families are experiencing — we plan

blindly. We jump to solutions without understanding root causes. In our urgency, we forget to engage in the deep learning and awareness-building that leads to lasting, impactful change.

When leaders embody a learning stance, they get curious about what's happening around them. They wonder about what their students and teachers are experiencing, and they lean into the questions that emerge as they try to meet their community's needs. They strive to see the whole child, teacher, or community member — who they are, what strengths they possess, and what they need.

Leaders who are learners don't assume that they have all the answers. Instead, they share their questions and uncertainties with those around them and invite others to push their thinking and supportively challenge their assumptions. They see data as an important ally, not only to measure success, but also to understand their learners' strengths and needs to adapt their leadership and work toward equity-seeking change.

This way of learning publicly encourages teachers to be curious, too. When leaders model asking courageous questions and inviting colleagues to help them confront blind spots, they are creating space for teachers to do the same. When leaders become learners, they model what it looks like to honestly investigate one's practice instead of maintaining the appearance of success. They inspire others to learn by learning alongside them, naming

their learning process aloud.

This powerful leadership move supports schools to become learning communities that continuously ask: What's happening for our students? Is that what we want to see happening? What do we need to do to better support our students, especially those who are most vulnerable?

This kind of leadership has been especially important during the pandemic. The unprecedented nature of the crisis has forced all educators to become learners. For many educators, this process has felt chaotic and uncertain. But leaders who committed to being learners themselves and supported their teachers to do the same were able to rise to meet the needs of the moment.

For example, in one of Lead by Learning's partner schools in Richmond, California, teachers and leaders credit a culture of learning publicly with their successful effort to pivot quickly and effectively to remote learning, with powerful results for their students.

The teachers and principal came together weekly to openly discuss their challenges and uncertainties and support each other to change their practice based on what they were learning from students. The principal cultivated this culture by continuously modeling learning herself.

Through these conversations, the teachers and the principal created innovative ways to understand student progress, such as gathering

## A LEADER WHO IS

### A LEARNER:

- Publicly models a learning stance (curiosity, vulnerability, trust, flexibility, adaptability);
- Uses data to make adult and student learning visible;
- Adapts and improves by deepening self-awareness; and
- Leads collaborative learning by experiencing and reflecting on conditions that have supported their own learning.

## A LEADER WHO IS

### A PARTNER:

- Values multiple perspectives and seeks thought partnership;
- Listens deeply with empathy and care, looking first for assets and connections;
- Builds relationships that cultivate a culture of professional respect, trust, agency, and distributed leadership; and
- Supports rigorous learning steeped in social and emotional learning.

## A LEADER WHO IS

### A VISIONARY:

- Puts students at the center of learning by identifying and returning to high-leverage goals that target students' needs;
- Communicates purpose and progress in humanizing, authentic ways to build awareness and support continuous improvement;
- Creates space to move beyond transactional compliance to curiosity and collective efficacy; and
- Is driven by a moral imperative.

video recordings of students doing science experiments in their homes, and prioritized small-group virtual instruction as a way to differentiate.

### THE PARTNER

The work of a principal can be isolating. Often, school leaders grapple with crises and dilemmas behind closed doors, waiting until they have made a decision or action plan to share their thinking with teachers and their community. But, in many cases, it would be more effective for principals to invite teachers and key community members into the messy thinking and sense-making that typically happens behind closed doors. Strong leaders recognize that complex problems cannot be solved by one person alone.

Strong leaders take a partnership approach that leverages multiple perspectives and local expertise to develop shared vision and collective responsibility. They invite those around them to grapple with authentic challenges that emerge in real time. They deeply listen and view their thought partner's perspective as important data when identifying a path forward.

The pillar of any partnership is relational trust, which develops by routinely engaging in honest conversations and working hand in hand with others to make decisions and drive action. Sometimes leaders think relational trust is built apart from work, even going so far as to shield people from work to develop a relationship with them. We work with leaders to see that professionalizing relational trust happens when we collaborate and lean into complex and important work. When we do this, we signal to one another that we value each other's contributions.

By cultivating trust and involving others in their leadership, leaders communicate to teachers and community members that they are valued and that their experience matters. As a result, they develop buy-in and the support of their community

needed to implement the decisions successfully.

During moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, partnership is a game changer. In our work with school leaders this past year, we found that the leaders who were accustomed to working in partnership with their teachers and nurturing collective efficacy were more able to pivot and adapt than those who worked in isolation.

For example, a principal from one of our partner schools realized that he was having a hard time understanding what students were learning. He could no longer just pop into a classroom to see the instruction taking place and learn which assessments departments were using. He invited teacher leaders at the school to think about this dilemma with him.

At a staff meeting, he expressed why it was important to him that the school identify clear ways to understand student progress and shared his wonderings about how to do so. Then he listened and asked probing questions. He learned that teachers shared his concerns, and together they constructed a plan to facilitate similar conversations within their departments, gather data, and come back to the table to identify promising practices to spread.

When principals partner with teachers in this way, teachers feel safe enough to talk to their principals about what is working and what they're uncertain about as they support students. It creates a culture of care, professional respect, and distributed leadership. In addition, strong partnerships support retention and job satisfaction, which are critical for sustaining equitable improvement in schools.

### THE VISIONARY

A visionary leader puts students at the center of learning by identifying and focusing on high-priority goals that target students' most pressing needs. Visionary leaders have both a long-

term picture of success and a practical understanding of what is happening that allows them to make incremental changes to make progress toward their vision.

Although they recognize that logistics are important, they do not get bogged down in them. They are able to delegate and prioritize where to put their energy to remain focused on their vision for student learning.

Phrases we heard from such leaders were: "I did [the operational task], but I didn't spend that much time on it" or "I have very competent support staff."

These leaders' vision connects back to their internal moral compass, their "why." When we asked one effective principal how her vision supported her work throughout the pandemic, she said, "I have always relied on my moral compass and have not wavered. This year, it's even more important to stay true to who I am and show care to my team and stakeholders."

During the stress of the pandemic, the visionary leaders we worked with did not keep their vision to themselves. They were clear on their nonnegotiables, communicated these to staff, and explained the "why" behind them. These leaders made time for their teachers and staff to discuss, make sense of, and ask questions about the vision.

They also were clear on what parts of the vision they wanted teacher input on. These leaders posed questions such as: Why is this our vision or goal? What adjustments need to be made based on what teachers know about their students? How is this serving our most vulnerable students and families?

These discussions led to a strong sense of community and collective efficacy among teachers. For example, last February, one visionary principal who kept returning her teachers to their schoolwide focus on small-group intervention throughout the pandemic, said, "While our teachers feel all the things that educators across the nation feel right now, they also feel an energy around wanting to get better because they are doing it together."

## WHAT CAN DISTRICT LEADERS DO?

These three capacities are not innate. They can be cultivated with support. District leaders' support can nurture and help sustain school leaders' roles as learners, partners, and visionaries. In turn, district leaders benefit from support that helps them value and cultivate those leadership skills.

Here are three ways district leaders can support these capacities in their school leaders.

**Experience: Give leaders the opportunity to experience these capacities themselves.** Identify district leaders who can provide school leaders with models of each of the capacities. Think broadly and involve multiple leaders. For example, the chief academic officer might model the partner capacity by inviting principals to co-design their own professional learning; the director of curriculum and instruction might model the learner capacity by bringing an authentic dilemma to a group of principals and ask for their thought partnership to move forward.

When you provide an experience, make sure to also provide a moment of meaning-making for principals to reflect on the experience and connect it back to their own leadership. Allowing school leaders to experience what it's like to have their leader exhibit these dispositions is a powerful first step in

building their own capacity.

**Practice: Give leaders the opportunity to plan how they will practice leading with these dispositions in mind.**

We use a framework that describes elements of each capacity as an anchor as we support leaders to grow in these capacities. We ask them to focus on one capacity and plan how they will incorporate that capacity into their next leadership moves.

Will they bring back the school vision and goals at the next staff meeting and invite teachers' perspectives on progress (visionary)? Will they focus on seeking multiple perspectives and listening to teachers before making decisions (partner)? Will they look for the kind of data that will help them understand their learners' experience and bring that to the decision-making table (learner)?

Providing leaders time to be intentional about developing these leader dispositions is essential.

**Reflect: Give leaders the opportunity to reflect on the impact of their changes in practice.** Just like teachers need time to reflect on the impact of their instructional decisions, so do leaders.

After leaders have decided what capacity they are focusing on and made a plan for moving forward with that capacity in mind, give leaders

the chance to reflect on how their leadership moves impacted teachers and students. Ask them how they know whether they have succeeded in growing as a partner, visionary, and learner.

Invite leaders to bring data to their own leader collaboration meetings (e.g. notes from leadership team meetings, classroom observations, instructional coaching discussions, etc.). Provide them with time to discuss their data with colleagues, with guiding questions such as: Are you seeing what you were hoping to see? What leadership move do you want to make next to support teacher/student learning? How will you know if it works?

Providing leaders time to reflect on their own leadership moves is a crucial element of developing leader capacity.

Even before the pandemic, leaders experienced stressful times and there will continue to be stressful times ahead. Our learner-partner-visionary framework offers leaders a clear and simple anchor to lean on in any crisis. This framework allows leaders to prioritize what matters most and galvanize their staff as they identify a path forward together.

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As crises mount, respond with compassionate leadership

*Continued from p. 29*  
yet another highly infectious pandemic — a pandemic of compassion.

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