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# **Leadership in Creating the Outstanding School: A Paradigm Shift in Style and Practice**

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the leadership practices needed to set up the conditions for building an outstanding school. Purporting a shift in the way school leaders think about schooling today, Dr. Bruce explores the need for developing a collaborative school culture to build a learning platform to meet the needs of students growing up in an information rich world. In doing so he offers practical advice for school leaders gained from a wealth of experience in leading international schools.



## Introduction

The role of schools in the information age is to prepare students to be the leaders of tomorrow. Constant change is now a characteristic of our society and schools need to create an interdisciplinary curriculum that is relevant, challenging and caters for the individual needs of each student. In addition to the traditional learning areas, our students will need to be able to cope with constant change, to have a thorough understanding of, and proficient skills in information technology and to be creative problem solvers. (Lynch, 2012; Lynch and Madden, 2015; Lynch and Smith, 2013, 2007)

Innovation, creativity and an improved capacity to adapt to changing circumstances will be the forefront of future learning. The schools of the information age will need teachers committed to active participation in inquiry based learning and problem solving, rather than the passive transmission and reception of information. The Head's role in an international school is that of the leading learner. The Head needs to be an exemplary educator and administrator ready to share his/her skills within a collaborative culture of learning and quality management. New skills will be required in addition to the traditional skills of human, physical, site and financial management (Lynch, 2012). These skills must include a capacity to lead collaboratively, an ability to develop and articulate a shared educational vision, a commitment to the empowerment of staff and students and the ability to foster a school culture of continuous improvement. These skills together with the traditional responsibilities of school leadership will lead to the creation of outstanding learning communities (Lynch and Madden, 2015).

The traditional leadership skills that have proved effective in the past will still be a component of leadership but there needs to be a paradigm shift to a more collaborative approach. In this paper I present an alternative paradigm in educational leadership and practice and offer strategies that may assist practising educational administrators to successfully implement the proposed changes. The paper will focus on three specific areas:

1. Developing a Collaborative School Culture
2. Creating Learning Communities
3. Leading the Transformation



I now explain each of these.

### **1. Developing a Collaborative School Culture**

The leader/leadership team within a school needs to develop strategies to foster and nurture a collaborative culture within their learning environment. Collaboration between all stakeholders (students, faculty, parents, administration and the governing board) will facilitate an organizational culture conducive to excellence in teaching and learning. In collaborative school cultures certain practices are evident.

Kent (1994) states that collaborative cultures support a shared sense of purpose, focus on long-term improvement, and support a network of professionals who share problems, ideas, materials and solutions. The following features are evident in these cultures:

- Regular opportunities for continuous improvement (Rosenholtz, 1989)
- Opportunities for career long learning (Rosenholtz, 1989)
- Teachers who are more likely to trust, value, and legitimize sharing expertise; seek advice; and help other teachers (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991)
- More team teaching and shared decision making (Ashton and Webb, 1986, in Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991)

Certain structures and systems need to be in place to allow collaborative cultures to be established and nurtured. Peterson (1994) shares structures that support collaboration in schools and these structures include:

- Shared decision making and site based management models
- School Improvement planning team
- Faculty study groups that meet to discuss professionally relevant topics
- Regular and continuous communication of ideas, sharing of materials, and time to reflect on one's work
- Interdisciplinary curriculum projects
- Team teaching
- Peer Observation



- Collective work on new instructional models
- Collaborative decision making and planning of professional development activities

Based on my experience in schools within Australia and in five international schools, the following strategies are offered as suggestions for developing a collaborative culture within a school.

### 1. A Collaborative Leadership Style

A collaborative style of leadership needs to be adopted where roles and responsibilities within the management or organizational and educational programs are delegated to others. People are trusted to fulfill their responsibilities and the school leadership team acts in a support role to assist teams and individuals.

### 2. A Model of Participation, Team Building and Cooperation

Teams are formed and reformed to accomplish tasks within the management of the school. Board, teacher, student and parent participation in decision-making is to be encouraged. Team building activities are planned on a regular basis and form an integral part of the professional development of staff and interaction with parents and board members.

### 3. Students Taking Responsibility for Their Own Learning.

Teachers are discouraged from spoon-feeding students and are provided with support to enable them to implement student-centred and cooperative learning techniques in the classroom. Students are invited to participate in discussions concerning assessment and reporting procedures. In some classrooms and within specific faculty areas a negotiated curriculum is introduced which incorporates the needs of students into the curriculum areas.

### 4. Stakeholder Participation in School Planning

The school community including parents, teachers, students, administration and governing board must play a role in the development of strategic and management plans. Representatives from each stakeholder group participate in the planning processes and this leads to a greater level of ownership of the plans. A collaborative approach to decision making also leads to an extension



of the partnership between school and community. The leadership team needs to be committed to this collaborative approach and act as role models on the process.

#### 5. Training and Development Initiatives for Parents and Community Members

Governing Board members, parents and community members who have not participated in decision making at the school level need to be trained and supported in order for their input to be informed and effective. Parents participating in these decisions may need training in meeting procedures, school organization, financial management, school governance, planning strategies, information technology and curriculum awareness.

Training initiatives need to be expanded to include these additional members.

#### 6. Moving Stakeholders from Personal Needs to Group Needs

This area is one of the most difficult strategies to achieve because it means changing the existing paradigm for many people. Moving people away from what is best for my child to what is best for the school as a whole is a challenge that must be met. It is essential that the leadership team at the school use a long term approach of personal interaction with as many people within the community as possible informing them of the collective goals of the school and seeking their support, knowledge and expertise. Community networks need to be established and nurtured and at times it may be appropriate to publish information in a variety of languages to ensure that effective communication is being achieved.

#### 7. High Expectations

The articulation of high expectations for student and teacher performance together with exemplary organization performance must be a priority. The leader of the school must regularly articulate the mission and expectations of the school so that high expectations and high achievement become an accepted component of the school's organization culture. Achievements need to be highlighted and published using the school's internal publications and through the print media and websites. A communications and media plan is a necessity.

#### 8. Needs Based Educational Programs

The school needs to be committed to the implementation of exemplary needs based educational programs for all students, exemplary teaching at all levels and the provision of educational



resources to support teaching and learning. Areas for improvement should be identified and strategies for budget support included within the strategic plans.

#### 9. Positive School Climate – Praise, Encouragement and Achievement

People working in organizations such as schools need to have a sense of belonging where concerns and problems are addressed without conflict and achievement is recognized and rewarded. When people work collaboratively in teams a partnership is established and the school reaps the benefits. Schools need to actively encourage a partnership between parents and the school. When problems arise, it is more beneficial to work on improving the processes rather than placing blame on people. The leadership team will need to communicate that mistakes will happen and that we can all learn from them and make sure they don't happen again. Staff, parents and students should be publicly acknowledged for their contributions to the school and this will lead to increased levels of commitment and support.

10. Community Participation – an inviting and welcoming ethos towards parent and community participation will greatly assist in the establishment of a genuine partnership in education.

#### 11. Development and Implementation of a School/Community Relations Plan

Effective collaboration between all stakeholders in a school is dependent on effective communication. To enable this to occur, the school must plan the ways that information is sought and distributed through its internal and external publics. For people to successfully contribute to school programs it is necessary for them to make informed decisions. An effective school/community relations plan provides the means to accomplish that task.

In a study of teacher leaders, Leiberman, Saxl, and Miles (1988) identified key skills of leaders:

- (1) building trust and rapport,
- (2) diagnosing the organization,
- (3) dealing with the collaborative process,
- (4) using resources,
- (5) managing work, and
- (6) building skill and confidence in others.



These skills support the interactions of colleagues and staff as they engage in joint work, collaborative projects, and collegial problem solving.

An educational leader can facilitate the establishment of an organizational school culture that enables collaboration to take place. The role as Head of School is to be a role model for others and his/her commitment to a collaborative style of leadership must be visible and genuine. The administrative and organizational roles of principalship are important and time management skills will assist in accomplishing them. However, a focus on people (supporting teachers, parents and students in the achievement of quality educational outcomes) will lead to even higher level outcomes that will impact on the lives and the future of our students.

It is important to note that in addition to school leaders taking responsibility for developing collaborative cultures, the role of the teacher cannot be underestimated. Johnson (1990) notes that teachers have an important role in this process:

Whatever support administrators provide, teachers themselves must take ultimate responsibility for collaboration. Teachers both constitute and create the context for collegiality. Removing structural barriers to exchange will not alone ensure that teachers eagerly and confidently cooperate and critique each other's practice. Strong norms of autonomy and privacy prevail among teachers. Creeping fears of competition, exposure to shortcomings, and discomfiting criticism often discourage open exchange, cooperation and growth. Until teachers overcome such fears and actively take charge of their own professional relations, teaching will likely remain isolating work. The initiative is theirs, but the responsibility for creating more collegial schools cannot be theirs alone (Johnson, 1990, p. 178-179).

## **2. Creating Learning Communities**

As collaborative cultures are established in schools, all stakeholders play an important role in determining the preferred future of the school. Peter Senge (1990) argues that organizations must become learning organizations or learning communities. He defines a learning community as an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly



desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

Fundamental and rapid changes in society related to the explosion in information, the rapid growth of technology and the information economy may place pressure on education professionals to reconsider current views and images of schools. Educator and administrator perceptions of schools may need to change if we are to meet the challenges of the information age and the global economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Viewed as a learning community, a school responds creatively and adaptively to changes in education and society. All of the community's members are valued and share a common purpose in the pursuit and achievement of quality education. This demands of all members a committed, active involvement in inquiry and problem solving, rather than the passive transmission and reception of information from teachers to students.

The concept of schools as learning communities has the potential to build upon existing excellent practice and to provide new insights and understandings that will support our pursuit of quality education for all our students.

The NSW Department of School Education in Australia (1995) has embraced the issue of learning communities and has identified a number of expected outcomes which will assist in the achievement of quality educational outcomes for students:

1. Improvement in the quality of student outcomes
2. Improved capacity to adapt to changing circumstances
3. Enhanced skills and understandings
4. Increased innovation and creativity
5. Greater responsiveness to the external environment
6. Improved professional development for staff
7. More effective school and community partnerships
8. Improved commitment and energy
9. The development of a culture of continuous improvement



The schools in NSW were encouraged to explore the concepts of learning communities through faculty and staff meetings, reflection and professional development activities. The concepts of *learning, leadership, community and a culture of collaboration* formed the basis of developmental activities. I was principal of three schools in NSW before accepting appointments at international schools and these four concepts provided a foundation for my practice as an educational leader working towards the establishment of a collaborative learning culture within schools.

### 1. Learning

In learning communities:

- students are empowered, self-directed and committed learners
- teachers and administrators are committed learners with well-developed habits of continuous inquiry and reflection; they are life-long learners who recognize that they need continually to deepen their knowledge of teaching and learning processes
- the principal is the leading learner, who models lifelong learning and facilitates the learning of all members of the community
- parents are partners in the learning process
- there is a learning-focused work environment in which formal learning activities and informal, workplace learning are valued

### 2. Leadership

In a learning community, leaders are designers, teachers and stewards. Leaders in learning communities are responsible for building organizations where people are continually expanding their capabilities to share their future – that is, leaders are responsible for learning.

In a learning community, leadership, power and authority are generated by:

- the capacity to lead collaboratively
- the quality of contributions to the life of the school
- knowledge, wisdom, understanding and judgement

Authority derived in this manner is far more influential and durable than any authority derived from a position on the hierarchy. In a learning community, sharing power is essential.



### 3. Community

We need to:

- build stronger partnerships with parents
- build a sense of community within the school by
  - breaking down barriers between subjects
  - building learning communities in the classroom
  - breaking down barriers between people
- build networks and partnerships between groups of professionals and across the community including schools and other educational sectors.

### 4. A Culture of Collaboration

Schools that are learning communities have a collaborative culture characterized by a commitment to:

- continuous improvement
- experimentation
- a search for better practices both inside and outside the school
- contributing to other people's practices by sharing ideas
- critical reflection in an open and trusting environment
- discussing and challenging the purposes, values and practices of the school
- a culture of collaboration, in which all members of the community contribute to the achievement of shared goals

### **Shaping and Nurturing Collaborative Leadership**

There are many opportunities for teaching faculty and other staff in schools to take on leadership roles. Leadership can be within the classroom, the department where one works, within a team or project or within committees and task forces. Every teacher can be a leader in collaborative schools (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991). Effective collaboration requires the leader in a school to be committed to shared leadership. This involves delegation of responsibility and authority and empowering others to accept leadership roles within the school's organizational systems. Leadership is no longer associated only with the position that one holds. Authority derived from shared leadership and empowerment will be more effective than leadership based on a position within a hierarchy. Collaboration will require shared leadership but leadership that



is no longer associated only with the position that one holds. Certain myths concerning leadership have influenced leaders as they face the challenges of collaborative leadership and collaborative school cultures. Myths and resistance from individuals keep leadership from flourishing throughout schools.

The five myths of leadership noted by Bennis and Nanus (1985) need to be overcome in collaborative school cultures:

**Myth 1. Leadership is a rare skill**

- In many schools, teachers have leadership skills, but need the opportunities to use them. In collaborative schools, teachers, parents and others enact leadership
- Leadership opportunities can be accessed by all stakeholders within the school

**Myth 2. Leaders are born, not made.**

- In many schools, teachers, parents, and others have become leaders through support, trust, and specific training.
- In collaborative schools leaders nurture the skills and abilities of others so they can become leaders.
- Good schools grow leaders

**Myth 3. Leaders are charismatic.**

- Most collaborative leaders in groups are not charismatic, but are skilled, talented motivators of others.
- In collaborative schools, leadership takes on many forms and emanates from many different people.
- The diverse gifts and talents of people together with a strong values base can provide a foundation for leadership regardless of the charisma of individuals

**Myth 4. Leadership exists only at the top.**

- A leadership density is evident throughout the school

**Myth 5. The leader controls, prods, directs, and manipulates.**



- Effective leadership is not heavy-handed and pressuring.
- In collaborative schools, leaders facilitate, motivate, solve problems, and build a shared sense of purpose.
- Leadership in collaborative schools is more like being a mentor and coach

### 3. Leading the Transformation

Establishing a leadership density within a school and empowering others is the challenge that faces the educational leader in the information age. The managerial hierarchical style of the past will not succeed in the information age and global economy that provides the context for schools today. Our school graduates will need to be task oriented and people oriented as these skills will be those sought by employers of the future. The demonstrated style of the school leader will make a significant impact on the level of collaboration within a school.

I believe excellence in education needs to be based on the establishment and maintenance of a collaborative school culture. As the Head of four international schools I employed a transformational and distributive leadership style focused on participation, team building and cooperation to facilitate the establishment of a collaborative learning culture characterized by praise, encouragement, achievement and self-discipline. My leadership style focused on the following behaviours - *creating a vision for the future, communicating the vision to all stakeholders, implementing the vision, putting faith in people, encouraging a sense of community loyalty and creating a positive role.*

Throughout my career I have endeavored to establish collaborative learning communities based on four main principles.

1. A Focus on Learning – all students have the capacity to learn and each person brings to the school unique abilities that must be utilized and acknowledged. In a learning community, learning will focus on process as well as the content and product
2. Importance Of Community – building stronger partnerships with parents
3. Establishing and Maintaining a Culture of Collaboration – contributing to other people's practices by sharing ideas in an open and trusting environment



4. Strong Leadership – in a true learning community, leadership, power and authority are generated by the capacity to lead collaboratively, the quality of contributions to the life of the school and knowledge, wisdom, understanding and judgment

Within the context of a school, a leadership density can be developed. Leaders within schools can be nurtured, supported, and developed in collaborative cultures in a number of ways. For collaboration to work, teacher leadership needs to develop, grow, and flourish.

Developing teacher leadership does not mean that teachers take on the hierarchical, authoritarian leadership styles of traditional schools. Rather it requires that teachers engage in the type of collaborative, facilitative modes of leadership necessary in successful organizations. Nurturing quality leadership is not easy, but it can be achieved. Principals are important throughout the process of supporting expanded leadership roles for teachers. As a collaborative culture becomes stronger, teacher leaders then nurture the ongoing development of the school (Peterson, 1994).

Regardless of the context of each school, the educational leader and teachers will face difficulties and challenges as they work together to transform their schools into collaborative cultures. The task will take courage, time and a commitment to the goals of achieving outstanding educational outcomes for all students and teachers continually reflecting on their own teaching practice and improving their performance. In schools that have collaborative cultures, teachers work together to continually review and improve instructional programs and curriculum offerings. As Johnson (1990) noted, principals are important, but teachers must also motivate and lead. Developing strong, trusting collaborative cultures may build a foundation for continued growth for students, teachers and principals.

Maryland State Department of Education, (1997) developed a series of performance indicators that demonstrate effective leadership in promoting collaborative problem solving and open communication. The indicators included collaborating with stakeholders in the school improvement process, sharing student achievement data with all stakeholders, demonstrating effective group processes and consensus building efforts, communicating the vision, goals and ongoing progress to community members, recognizing and celebrating the contributions of school community members and nurturing and developing the leadership capabilities of others. As an educational leader constantly trying to improve processes and maintain exemplary



instructional programs, I incorporated the indicators shared above in all aspects of my interaction and with stakeholders in my schools. The outcomes were positive and community members welcomed the collaborative initiatives that characterized all aspects of the school's operations.

### **Concluding Comments**

Effective educational leadership of schools in the information age will necessitate a paradigm shift for school leaders. The concepts of collaborative leadership presented in this paper need to be internalized by school leaders and they must be prepared to take the important step of devolving responsibility and authority to others within the organization, providing the parameters for successful completion of tasks and trusting people to fulfill their roles with professionalism. A school may have outstanding facilities and the most sought after curriculum offerings but if the quality of the relationships between all members of the community is poor, it will impact on the academic program. People are a school's best resource and exceptional leaders empower people within schools to work collaboratively to achieve the mission of the school. The challenge for educational leaders is to decide whether they are prepared to accept the risks and opportunities that will eventuate when one leads the implementation of change in educational environments using a collaborative leadership style. The journey will be rewarding, and will lead to stronger relationships within schools, improved educational outcomes for students and the creation of outstanding schools.

“It is the richness of relationships, the adventure of discovery, the spontaneity and deep fulfillment of putting people ahead of schedules, and the joy of creating what did not exist before” (Covey 1990)

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