

PART I

Leadership Teaming

Part I of our book introduces the concept of leadership teaming and explores the significance of strong superintendent-principal relationships. Chapter 1 presents characteristics of quality teaming from the superintendent's perspective. Chapter 2 brings the principal's viewpoint to teaming by describing indicators of a supportive team culture and what superintendents do to lead principals effectively.

The Superintendent's Perspective

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Characteristics of High-Quality Teams

Management is about people. All of management structure is directed toward one aim, allowing the individual to perform his or her job to the utmost while experiencing joy in his or her work in a manner consistent with the aims of the organization. It is a leader's job to foster joy in work, harmony and teamwork.

—Rafael Aguayo (1990, p. 181)

LEADERSHIP TEAMS WORK IN HARMONY

Benjamin Franklin observed that getting the thirteen separate colonies to act as one was like trying to get thirteen bells to chime at the same time. Similarly, the superintendent's leadership challenge is to take a diverse group of principals and create a team that works in accord. Harmony can quickly disintegrate into disharmony, especially when the voices of the district directors and other support staff are added to the symphony.

Although a district has many teams, the group that includes the superintendent and principals is arguably the most powerful. Their collective leadership impacts all students and staff in a district. These leaders intuitively understand the need for harmonious relationships to achieve goals that require working together. Less intuitive is knowledge of the specific steps required to create a harmonious district leadership team. How

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does a superintendent encourage team values among principals who view themselves first and foremost as their school's advocate?

Teams Work in Coordination

A superintendent told me a story about an elementary school that changed their ending day bell schedule by just three minutes, with unanticipated results. The school site council had developed a school improvement plan that reallocated time that students spent waiting in line for the bus to more time in the classroom. However, like a pebble dropped in a pool, those few minutes' difference created ripples throughout the district—throwing off the district bus schedule, decreasing teacher-negotiated planning time, making faculty late for afterschool intramurals supervision, and causing students to arrive home late to anxious parents. Within hours of the change, the unsuspecting superintendent was fielding phone calls from the union, receiving e-mails from upset parents, and being visited by the school board president, who had received complaints.

As this example illustrates, teams are organizational groups composed of members who are interdependent and who must coordinate their activities to accomplish their goals (Northouse, 2007). In interdependent work, as in the bell schedule example, actions taken by a team member principal could require a response by each of the other team members, including the superintendent.

The coordination of interdependent work is effectively accomplished through sound relationships, positive connections, and responsiveness to other team members. Forming and developing individual school leaders into a district team is the superintendent's responsibility. The superintendent takes a group of individually diverse and geographically separated school principals and forms a team through strategies that build knowledge of each other's work.

One strategy is to create shared knowledge of each principal's school operations and leadership activities. When team members share knowledge of each other's activities and how they fit together, the powerful bond of understanding develops. This understanding provides a context for considering any impact on the district that was brought on by a change or decision.

Recently I met with a group of regional superintendents. Together we generated examples of how an understanding of each other's schools could be developed. One superintendent of a large district creates a video of each school and shows it to the team as a way to illustrate current activities. Another organizes a shadow experience whereby principals from the secondary school spend a day in the elementary school and vice versa to

“walk in each other’s moccasins.” Yet another forms teams of principals to “walk through” classrooms at schools around the district to observe curriculum in action and to talk with teachers.

Teams Model Collegiality

The leadership team is distinctly different from any other team in the school district. This team directly influences the entire school district’s performance through policies and procedures. The leadership team influences all operations in a school district and makes decisions that affect the work and morale of all. The team impacts student learning in a hands-on daily operational fashion, not in the more removed policy-making role of the school board.

It follows, then, that the role of the superintendent in interactions with a team of leaders is distinctly different from that of any other team in the district. The superintendent becomes a facilitator of districtwide decisions alongside the principals and between the principals and the school board.

The role model impact is powerful, but I often observe a disconnect when the superintendent expects collegial behavior in the schools but does not create a similar atmosphere within the leadership team. Principals will recognize a superintendent’s inconsistent behavior and report it to others. As a colleague once remarked to me, “You cannot mandate collaboration.” The best way for a leader to mold collaboration in others is to model that behavior. Rivero (1998), an expert on executive team behavior, reported on the importance of a CEO’s behavior as a model for developing subordinates. Team forming does not occur through control, but rather through a purposeful building of collegial relationships.

The superintendent-principal team functions in the spotlight of staff and community scrutiny. Thus, by the example demonstrated, the school staff has either an exemplary role model to emulate or a dysfunctional example to deride. The superintendent’s behavior directly affects principals who may emulate the superintendent’s actions with the school faculty.

VISION OF A LEADERSHIP TEAM

In junior high school, my English teacher noticed that I had difficulty reading words at a distance. He told my mother, who made an appointment with the optometrist. At this gawky, self-conscious, adolescent age, I was horrified at the thought of wearing glasses. I spent weeks in denial claiming that I could see a mosquito forty feet away. In the optometrist’s office, I faked my way through the tests, or so I thought. Not fooled, however,

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the optometrist took me to the window and pointed in the direction of the park across the street.

“See them?” he asked.

I did see something moving, so answered affirmatively.

He reached up and put corrective lenses in front of my eyes and asked, “See them now?”

I recall crying at that moment, when I clearly saw children on swings. I had missed seeing them before and knew that meant I needed glasses. Along with dismay, I also felt relief. By fooling myself, I had missed much. My vision could be so much better and the tool to fix that was literally in front of my eyes.

The superintendent likewise needs a clear vision of what a well-functioning team looks like. We need to put the corrective lenses in front of our eyes to see both principals working as a team and the way this strengthens the outcomes across the district.

Looking Good on the Surface

Most superintendents believe they do have a collaborative and supportive team of principals. Unfortunately, their visions are not always reflected in reality (Nadler & Spencer, 1998). Much teamwork is “cosmetic”: the trappings of teamwork are apparent, but the behavior of the team members reveals a lack of teamwork and negative relationships among individuals. Teams, like individuals, mask certain behaviors and beliefs in front of “the boss.”

This became clear to me one day when I observed two different leadership teams in two different districts. As a participant in a state process on school improvement, I had been asked to provide information to groups in both districts. While waiting my turn during their meetings, I had ample time to unobtrusively watch team actions and interactions. I was struck by the apparent similarities of the teams in size, structure, agenda, and identified tasks, but was stunned by the differences in the covert behaviors and overt actions of the principals.

Principals in Team I surreptitiously doodled, had quiet side interactions with obviously allied principals, and showed little interest or curiosity in the topic presented. They showed a single-minded focus on their own schools, with no apparent concern for other schools or students, and they were resistant to each other’s ideas. Some principals masked what they truly felt, and then later had conversations that indicated their frustration and lack of support for decisions that had been made.

Principals in Team II were engaged, exhibited relaxed and friendly body language, made comments relevant to the topic, provided positive

support for other principals' comments, and demonstrated the ability and the desire to see each other's point of view. Both the superintendent and the principals interacted with many words and gestures of appreciation.

Cosmetic teamwork results when surface behaviors affirm the value of teamwork, but members interact in subgroups by complaining and acting noncollaboratively. Cosmetic collaboration occurs when a superintendent claims to want teamwork but is unwilling to give up any control. Thus, the appearance of a cohesive team is there in the presence of the superintendent, but nothing transfers to the day-to-day behaviors or beliefs of the individual team members. In addition to the relationship between the superintendent and each principal, superintendents build connections among principals by promoting high-quality relationships.

Developing Prosocial Teams

Increased research provides credibility for the importance of adult prosocial behavior at work, sometimes labeled "citizenship" in the literature (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). One important aspect of prosocial behavior is an emphasis on the positive. Positive teams value what each individual contributes to the group. In *Good to Great*, Collins (2001) emphasizes the need to get the right people on the bus. Many superintendents and principals interpret this as a license to get rid of negative or bothersome team members, and hire those more amenable to their own perspective. However, a closer reading of Collins does not support this view. Collins states that it would be a "tragic mistake" to think that wantonly swinging the ax is the way to greatness. Instead, superintendents take the team they have and capitalize on various strengths of the members.

Some principals will challenge your faith in this concept. Joe was an inspirational principal and motivator for his staff yet disengaged and unresponsive with his colleagues. Building on his strengths, we asked Joe to lead the development of a plan for team recognition and rewards. His behavior changed, perhaps only temporarily. Nevertheless, when he was positively engaged with his peers, morale lifted perceptibly.

Building a positive team relationship requires the superintendent to first believe that team relationships are important in reaching districtwide goals. Most superintendents advocate for a collaborative team approach, yet demonstrate top-down command decisions and a belief that prosocial behaviors can be coerced. They miss the mark because command leadership produces team compliance that merely acknowledges the positional power of the superintendent. A superintendent's ability to develop a team that achieves districtwide goals requires both the belief in collective competence and the skills to develop positive, prosocial attitudes.

DEVELOP AN AFFIRMATIVE ORIENTATION

Positive organizational scholarship is a well-researched theory that emphasizes human potential. The premise is that high-quality connections and positive emotions produce a collective capability that helps organizations thrive. The need to maintain amicable social relationships is important when people work closely together and coordinate activities. Work goes well and is experienced as pleasurable when relationships are attended to—and poorly when they are not (Shedd & Bacharach, 1991).

One of my principal colleagues is fond of saying, “Attitude: everyone has one. You may as well have a positive one.” Every day he wears a little gold pin on his shirt collar that says “Attitude” as a reminder for all to stay the positive course even in the face of adversity and conflict.

Effective leaders have better-than-average interpersonal skills and build cooperative relationships with their followers. They are friendly, outgoing, responsive, encouraging, and diplomatic. They create attitudes among team members that become the foundation of successful teamwork. They praise others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting the contribution of their colleagues (Keen, 2003).

LaFasto and Larson (2001) worked twenty years on research, followed by seven years of writing about a wide array of work teams. They found supportiveness to be an important factor in teamwork. In this context, a supportive team member would be someone who is easy to work with and who demonstrates a willingness to help others achieve goals. Another important teamwork factor that differentiated effective from ineffective team members is a positive personal style, characterized by enthusiasm about the work, getting along well with others, and being friendly and well liked. A strong positive attitude conveys affirmation of the worth of our fellow team members.

Thrive With the Positive

In the field of psychology, positive emotions are recognized as a factor that allows individuals and teams to thrive and flourish. Social scientists and psychologists have established an empirical research base and thus given credibility to why and how positive activities work to promote flourishing of both individuals and work groups (Cameron et al., 2003).

Think of the best seminar you have ever attended—that time when you learned a great deal and had fun doing it. In addition to providing relevant content, the seminar instructor likely sprinkled in humor, fun, ice breakers, and strategies to promote positive thoughts and actions. You were engaged. Likewise, a superintendent needs to be more like a good

seminar instructor and less like the director of a stage play when meeting with the team of principals. If the superintendent is not comfortable leading these activities, then he or she should delegate this task to a team member who is comfortable in the role.

Positive emotions are worth cultivating because teams thrive in the presence of constructive experiences, supportive individual traits, and encouraging institutions (Cameron et al., 2003). Optimism, which is closely associated with the positive, is a cognitive process present when we expect a positive outcome. Optimists have high morale and feel upbeat and invigorated. They persevere, they hope. The superintendent begins to build optimism by demonstrating belief in the leadership capability of the principals, which in turn promotes the expectation of a positive result.

Play Together, Stay Together

When a focus is placed on the positive, a typical team meeting agenda looks a little different from a traditional meeting. Time for social interactions, play, and relationship activities are consistently built into the agenda, along with the more traditional reports, as the following example illustrates.

I asked a group of respected superintendent colleagues, including two who had been voted “State Superintendents of the Year,” what they had on their agenda for the annual leadership team retreat at the beginning of the school year. On the typical agenda was a book study, a videotape of the latest learning theory, “start-up” information, and a problem or two to solve. What riveted my attention, though, was the discussion of activities not appearing on the printed agenda. These superintendents built in numerous opportunities for fun and energizing activities. They knew that, while educating students is challenging and the problems are serious, positive and fun team activities create the conditions that open minds to constructive problem solving. If staff development is not a significant part of your experience, search through books such as *Effective Group Facilitation in Education* (Eller, 2004) for ideas that can energize a team.

The Positive Principle

Groups as well as individuals benefit from the power of positive thoughts and actions. The power of affirmative experiences is widely accepted as providing personal benefits to an individual. Interestingly, groups also demonstrate a similar benefit when the positive process is applied. Specifically, the “broaden-and-build” theory (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) recognizes that positive emotions broaden people’s momentary

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thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, including the intellectual resources needed in leadership teams. Positive emotions widen our array of thoughts and actions, a great benefit when teams come together to solve problems. Positive effects also accumulate and compound over time, transforming people—and consequently teams—for the better. Teams become more socially integrated, knowledgeable, effective, and resilient. Evidence suggests that high ratios of positive to negative experiences will distinguish individuals who flourish from those who do not. These same principles have been successfully applied to teams. However, positive experiences may need to outnumber negative experiences at ratios appreciably higher than those typically demonstrated by many superintendents when working with a leadership team.

A Critical Ratio

You have probably heard motivational speakers talk about “making positive deposits to individuals’ mental bank accounts.” While this notion appeals to our experience and instinct, it is also based in science. In an experimental study, Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found that positive experiences need to outnumber the negative at a higher rate than previously believed to overcome the toxicity of the negative. Researchers found that a ratio of two times positive to one negative characterizes both individuals and teams that thrive and flourish. Reading this ratio reminded me of an elementary classroom I visited where the teacher taught the students how to make a “compliment sandwich” as a way to give constructive advice. She said, “Say something nice, then give your suggestion, then say something nice again.”

Although simple, this advice illustrates that to function constructively and to flourish groups must experience a high rate of pleasant feelings. A caution is in order, however: The positive must be both appropriate and genuine or the leader risks losing credibility with the team. People sense when positive actions are feigned or forced. This kind of subterfuge will cause damage.

The superintendent brings out everyone’s best by creating positive emotions when the team is together. Some specific positive strategies follow:

Hold a quick drawing for small gift items to lift spirits.

Ask principals to share a highlight of their week in the school.

Place at each seat a small item such as notepad with the word “Attitude” on it.

Take a break and engage in a brief energizing physical or mental activity.

Use positive development strategies such as Appreciative Inquiry, discussed on page 11.

Appreciative Inquiry

Discovering the best of the human condition in organizations is fundamental to organizational development. One useful strategy is Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can be defined as the art and practice of strengthening a system's capacity to heighten positive potential. AI is based on the assumption that teams or groups of people have a positive core that, when revealed and tapped, results in positive energy and positive improvement. This process involves identifying past examples of peak performances or spectacular successes. Key elements that account for these past successes are identified, and a vision of the future is crafted based on what was extraordinarily successful in the past and what can be perpetuated in the future (Cameron et al., 2003).

Appreciative Inquiry is based in large part on two decades of work by David Cooperrider (Salopek, 2006), who realized the power of questions that focus on successes. AI emphasizes cooperatively searching for and building on an organization's strengths and potential. It asks each team member to heighten awareness of the value of each person in the team. This asset-focused strategy works on the principle that positive questions lead to positive change, and that our words create our worlds (Markova & Holland, 2005). Practicing Appreciative Inquiry is a positive-thinking experience.

Relationships Rule

Work management, relationship management, and external boundary management are all necessary for a team to lead effectively in a demanding environment (Nadler & Spencer, 1998). Similarly, Glaser (2005) identified three important dimensions in team problem solving: relationships, content, and process. The common denominator between the work of Nadler, Spencer, and Glaser is relationships. Relationships are fundamental to all other work because they connect and link leaders. It is my experience and observation that, after completing a certification program, almost all principals and superintendents have mastered the content and tasks of the position. Despite their proficiency at the content and tasks, though, learning relationship management often takes time in the school of "hard knocks" as they learn the importance of peer and supervisory relationships.

As a first-year principal, I felt apprehensive when the superintendent asked me into his office one day. He was an experienced superintendent and cared about the inner workings of the leadership team. Gently he advised me to relax my task orientation. He assured me he had no doubt I knew the job content and was well prepared to handle the tasks of administration. He asked me to place equal importance on building relationships with the other principals by showing my positive, people-oriented social side.

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“But,” I protested, “I’m much younger than the other principals, a female, and less experienced. Won’t they see me as naïve and weak?”

“No,” he said, “they’ll see you as human and approachable. They already know you have the skills because we hired you for the position. Now they need to know you as their friend and supportive colleague.”

Like many new administrators, I had focused first on the content issues: Get the job done, raise the test scores, and check the items off the “to do” list. By habit, according to Glaser, we go straight to the content and forget about the importance of process and relationships. The reward from focusing on the positive is gaining a greater joy in the accomplishments of your leadership team.

TAKE-AWAY MESSAGE

Teamwork by itself is not sufficient to handle the complexities of positively impacting the achievement of all students, but without it a district becomes a collection of schools, not a team working toward common goals. The effective superintendent-principal leadership team works as diligently on relationship development as it does on test scores. In times of turmoil, affirmative leaders are needed to move teams forward and address the problems schools face. The knowledgeable superintendent assists principals to thrive and flourish by promoting high-quality connections and positive emotions between them.

CLOSING IN ON KEY CONCEPTS

- Teams are interdependent.
- Teams need to think “ours,” not “my.”
- Teams achieve their goals when each member envisions the desired team.
- Team values are elusive and lie deep beneath cosmetic behavior.
- Teams need to find ways to emphasize positive attitudes and to build healthy team emotions.
- Superintendents need sophisticated facilitative skills to form productive teams.

EXTENDING YOUR THINKING

1. It has been said that there is no “I” in team. What actions build the belief in “we” as opposed to “me”? How does a superintendent

communicate that the district's success is "ours" and a result of collective action? What inhibits or obstructs these beliefs from becoming a reality?

2. Is attitude really contagious? How can a team respond to a person who seems to be inoculated against a positive attitude?
3. Have you worked with a superintendent or supervisor who created joy and energy even when the team was doing the "tough stuff"? If yes, what contributed to this positive attitude? If no, what could have been done to make the work more welcome?