

# other duties as assigned

Tips, Tools, and Techniques for Expert Teacher Leadership

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## shared leadership



In mid-August, the much anticipated “Welcome Back, Teachers” letter arrived from the new principal at Oregon’s Lake Oswego Junior High School. This year’s letter was different. It read like a teacher’s to-do list:

*Dear Faculty and Staff,*

*Welcome back! For our upcoming inservice day together, please*

- *Bring two colored markers.*
- *Bring three note cards, each one with an idea you have always wanted to investigate or try in your classroom.*
- *Wear tennis shoes.*
- *Bring a bottle of water. (We’re going to be working hard!)*
- *Leave your cell phone, doubts, I can’ts, and it won’t works at home.*

*See you at 8 a.m. on August 31 in the school cafeteria. Breakfast and lunch will be provided.*

*Can’t wait for us to get started,*

*Your principal*

This was definitely not business as usual!

## A Culture of Interdependence

Consider rafting a river with a group of friends. There is a guide, there are charts and maps of the river, and there is a sense of adventure as the group descends into the water. There are challenges ahead—perhaps boulders under the water that could sink the raft. Whitewater rapids and currents of varying strength are downstream. The guide instructs the group to listen to his commands, asks that each person be alert to potential hazards, and trains the group to work together. Throughout the journey, the group’s trust in their leader grows, as does their sense of exhilaration in doing something successful together.

Shared leadership in schools is a similar journey. Through collaboration, collegiality, community, cooperation, and communication, interdependence emerges and is nourished. *Interdependence* is quality of connection built on trust and respect. For schools, the vehicle for building interdependence is not a raft but groups of teachers organized into teams—grade-level groups, departments, and small professional learning communities, each headed by a leader who facilitates the group’s work and guides it toward a common end. As a faculty develops a shared, organization-wide understanding of who they are and what they are about, they are increasingly able to engage in ongoing, meaningful conversation that, if wisely and carefully conducted, becomes action on behalf of students and marks progress toward identified goals.

Historically, schools have operated on a hierarchical model. There is a leader at the top, who is charged with overseeing groups of teachers, who are charged with overseeing groups of students. Although teachers and others on staff work side by side, eat together, laugh, and share stories together, for most of the day they work alone, in their own individual classrooms with the doors closed. The faculty might meet monthly to hear updates about upcoming events, budget issues, schoolwide behavioral concerns, and district messages. Faculty meetings seldom involve robust discussions on issues or tackle curricular

or instructional undertakings. When decisions are made, everyone knows it's the principal who says what's what. It's the principal who manages the operation.

Over the past several decades, a new model of interdependence has emerged. Margaret Wheatley (2000) describes this approach as one in which “people organize together to accomplish more, not less” (p. 340). She goes on to note, “Behind every organizing impulse is the realization that by joining with others we can accomplish something important we could not accomplish alone.”

Schools, as living systems, have a great capacity to organize and to bring energy and passion to the work they undertake. When the system works as an integrated whole, with everyone in the organization connected around a central purpose, a synergy happens that can propel a school forward. We see this happen, for example, when faculty members commit to fully implementing new, cross-grade instructional strategies for reading, and then reading scores go up. We see it when a school faculty faithfully conducts data reviews and provides an array of instructional supports designed to help students meet grade-level reading and math standards, and then increasing numbers of students meet these standards and go on to graduate.

## The Challenge of Leadership

Leadership in learning institutions means everyone understands and embraces the school's vision for student success, and everyone on staff participates in the journey toward that end. As Charlotte Roberts writes in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, “An interdependent vision can be realized only through collaborative action, so relationships at work become central” (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, p. 231). To re-energize, redefine, or re-establish the school's direction so that it provides opportunities for all students to succeed, there must be a collective responsibility for strengthening relationships and for improving academic achievement. This is the challenge administrators and teacher leaders share.

Fortunately, there are strong models for us to follow. Numerous major longitudinal research studies of effective schools attribute gains in student achievement to the work of small learning communities, team structures, and collaborative decision making (Jackson, Davis, Aheel, & Bordonaro, 2000; Lipsitz & Felner, 1997; Marzano, 2003; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2003, 2005). Similarly, in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) Peter Senge references teams, decision making, and a task orientation as crucial for any learning organization. Robert J. Marzano (2003) provides additional insight when he identifies three components that are necessary for establishing an interdependent work environment: broadening the range of participants in conversation, sharing power, and enhancing interpersonal relationships. Correspondingly, literature on high school reform points to “twin pillars . . . (1) instructional improvement and (2) structural changes that personalize learning” (Quint, 2008, p. 68).

However, structural changes do not automatically result in substantive conversations or strengthened relationships among the adults who populate the school. Fostering a culture of interdependence relies on more than the structural apparatus usually in place in schools, which includes the building’s schedules, how space is used, which rooms are allocated to which programs, and how adults spend their time. For example, team teaching can be an effective structure, but teaching side by side should not presume the two teachers will have conversations about students’ challenges with curricular concepts or about the instructional strategies in use. The building’s schedule might allow a group of teachers to share a common planning time but that, too, does not guarantee the teachers will meet together to assess student work or solve problems related to curriculum alignment.

The truth is, the critical work of schools is done through relationships among people. These relationships must be nurtured and attended to so that conversations move beyond collegiality to collaboration and a commitment to improving one’s practice. In fact, recent research reviews done by the National Staff Development Council (2008) identified working in teams as the model for strengthening teaching

Our real concern, of course, is teacher leaders and teams under construction. In schools, the bricks are teaching and learning, and the mortar is the relationships that surround the bricks, hold them in place, and allow the school to function. Whether you are building a new team or reenergizing an existing one, before you get to the bricks-and-mortar stage, you need be sure certain foundational processes and systems are in place. These will be the internal structure that strengthens the team as it functions throughout the year. Just as the construction foreman works from a blueprint that details the building's specifications, your blueprint consists of all the routines and systems needed to support a functioning, effective team: a clear purpose, set meeting dates and times, protocols for making decisions, meeting routines and roles, systems for regular communication, team-building measures, and a defined process for setting goals. When these are in place and operational, you have a base structure that will support the work of the team.

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#### **ELISE'S DILEMMA**

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Elise and her team had been together for a number of years. It had gotten to the point where she did most of the work for the team. Others were always busy or didn't follow through on assignments well enough. As she started a new year, Elise hoped she could change how her team worked; she wanted team members to come together to engage in common work and to think of participation and follow-through as a matter of professional pride. She thought about asking the group to create common agreements, but this felt forced. Then she wondered if her teammates would be willing to give her feedback about what they saw as working or not working under her leadership, but that felt too risky. Elise had three days to come up with an agenda for the half-day August inservice meeting, and she was stuck.



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**CONSIDER THESE KEY IDEAS AS YOU  
THINK ABOUT ELISE'S DILEMMA:**

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### Relationships

- A sense of shared commitment really begins when everyone feels they have a voice in a discussion and the focus for the work of the team has been defined.
- The teacher leader is in the driver's seat and must be willing not only to share his or her thoughts about leading the team and about teamwork but also to let others know as this thinking evolves or changes.
- Change takes time and is achieved in increments.

### Teaching and Learning

- Teacher leaders are responsible for getting group buy-in for a common focus that is meaningful and thought provoking.
- Professional learning conversations that produce results tend to begin with a focus on data, research, a startling finding, or a compelling topic.
- Protocols are a valuable way to direct and structure professional learning conversations.

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**OUR RESPONSE TO ELISE: LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

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We'd suggest Elise start by sharing her goals, insights, and dreams with the team and go on to acknowledge her desired shift to "leader as collaborator" from her past role as "leader as executive." For her team's next meeting, Elise might engage the group in a team activity based on the triple Ss—shared work, shared leadership, shared responsibility—and discuss the results. If one of the team's goals is to develop a student portfolio system, for example, Elise could distribute information and research links for various portfolio systems and ask the team members to work in pairs to research the various systems. After 30 minutes of information gathering, pairs would report out on