

Distributed Leadership Basics

A central goal of the approach is for individuals to succeed in a climate of shared purpose, teamwork, and respect – an atmosphere in which we can reach out to help one another and feel free to turn to ask for help. In other words, Distributed Leadership supports and strengthens already outstanding individuals.

Principles of Distributed Leadership:

1. *Distributed Leadership* does not mean *delegating*. Instead, it means finding the best path by tapping the expertise, ideas, and effort of everyone involved.
2. Distributed Leadership brings success in handling problems, threats, and change. It not only encourages idea sharing; it demands it. Good ideas can come to fruition because a team is ready to ignite the process moving from concept to reality.
3. "The way we've always done things" isn't necessarily the best way. Using Distributed Leadership, we can look for better ways and test them through controlled, reasoned risk taking.
4. In a Distributed Leadership environment, mistakes often lead to discovering valuable new approaches.
5. In Distributed Leadership, not everyone is a decision-maker, but everyone is an expert whose knowledge contributes to the decision-making process.
6. Distributed Leadership is not for mavericks and lone eagles.
7. Distributed Leadership is about cooperation and trust, not about competition among units and factions. We all share the same mission, even though we contribute to it in different ways.
8. Distributed Leadership empowers everyone to make his or her job more efficient, meaningful, and effective.
9. Under Distributed Leadership, everybody matters.

The basic idea of distributed leadership is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles. Furthermore, in any organized system, competency varies considerably among people in similar roles; some principals and teachers, for example, are simply better at doing some things than others, either as a function of their personal preferences, their experience, or their knowledge. Organizing these diverse competencies into a coherent whole requires understanding how individuals vary, how the particular knowledge and skill of

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one person can be made to complement that of another, and how the competencies of some can be shared with others.

To be sure, performance-based accountability in schools, and good management practice generally, require that certain people be held responsible for the overall guidance and direction of the organization, and ultimately for its performance. Distributed leadership does not mean that no one is responsible for the overall performance of the organization. **It means, rather, that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result.**

Organizational coherence on basic aims and values, then, is a precondition for the exercise of any effective leadership around instructional improvement. Collaboration and collegiality among teachers, and among teachers and principals, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improvement. Distributed leadership poses the challenge of how to distribute responsibility and authority for guidance and direction of instruction, and learning about instruction, so as to increase the likelihood that the decisions of individual teachers and principals about what to do, and what to learn how to do, aggregate into collective benefits for student learning. I will discuss the practical implications of this challenge in a moment.

Creating a new model of distributed leadership consists of two main tasks: 1) describing the ground rules which leaders of various kinds would have to follow in order to engage in large scale improvement; and 2) describing how leaders of various kinds in various roles and positions would share responsibility in a system of large scale improvement. It should go without saying that this model is necessarily provisional and tentative since it is a considerable departure from the status quo and its basic premise is that improvement involves both learning the ground rules and sharing responsibility for implementing them over time. It is impossible to say at the outset exactly what will be required at later stages.

Here, then, are five principles that lay the foundation for a model of distributed leadership focused on large scale improvement:

- *The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role:* If we put improvement of practice and performance at the center of our theory of leadership, then these other theories of leadership role must shift to theories about the possible skills and knowledge that leaders would have to possess to operate as agents of large scale instructional improvement. If the purpose of leadership is the improvement of teaching practice and performance, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations for instruction. All other skills are instrumental. Hence,

- *Instructional improvement requires continuous learning:* Leadership must create conditions

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that value learning as both an individual and collective good. Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement.

- *Learning requires modeling:* Leaders must lead by modeling the values and behavior that represent collective goods. Role-based theories of leadership wrongly envision leaders who are empowered to ask or require others to do things they may not be willing or able to do. But if learning, individual and collective, is the central responsibility of leaders, then they must be able to model the learning they expect of others. Leaders should be doing, and should be seen to be doing, that which they expect or require others to do. Likewise, leaders should expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny as they exercise toward others.

- *The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution.* If collective learning is the goal, my authority to command you to do something doesn't mean much if it is not complemented by some level of knowledge and skill which, when joined with yours, makes us both more effective. Similarly, if we have the same roles, I have little incentive to cooperate with you unless we can jointly produce something that we could not produce individually. In both instances the value of direction, guidance, and cooperation stems from acknowledging and making use of differences in expertise.

- *The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity:* Distributed leadership makes the reciprocal nature of these accountability relationships explicit. My authority to require you to do something you might not otherwise do depends on my capacity to create the opportunity for you to learn how to do it, and to educate me on the process of learning how to do it, so that I become better at enabling you to do it the next time.

Spillane, in his important piece on distributed leadership, borrows from the language of distributed cognition and speaks of expertise and responsibilities as being “stretched over” people in different roles rather than neatly divided among them. (Spillane, Halverson et al. 1999)

The exact design of roles and functions is less important than the underlying principles of distributed expertise, mutual dependence, reciprocity of accountability and capacity, and the centrality of instructional practice to the definition of leadership roles.

It is also worth emphasizing again that this model of distributed leadership is very far from the dominant institutional structure of most public schools and school systems. It confronts the impulses for privacy and for idiosyncratic instructional practice. It challenges the conventional roles of policy and

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administrative leaders in buffering that practice from outside interference. It posits instead a model in which instructional practice is a collective good—a common concern of the whole the institution—as well as a private and individual concern. It posits a theory of leadership that, while respecting, acknowledging, and capitalizing on differences in expertise, predicts failure in the social isolation of practice and predicts success in the creation of interdependencies that stretch over these differences.

Primary Sources:

1. <http://www.wcupa.edu/scripts/vacancies/distlead.asp>

2.

<http://www.politicalscience.uncc.edu/godwink/PPOL8687/Wk10%20March%202022%20Accountability/Elmore%20Building%20a%20New%20Structure%20for%20Leadership.pdf>