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Mapping Leadership Practice

Distributed Leadership in Action

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT YOU KNOW GOOD LEADERSHIP WHEN YOU SEE IT. The energy in great schools is so palpable that you can feel it the minute you walk into the school.

Throughout our careers, we have worked to understand and capture the dynamics of great school leadership. Having taught in a top-ranked educational leadership preparation program for over 20 years, we have seen many changes in public education, policy, and the expectations of leaders. One of the most exciting and energizing experiences we have had is working in schools with great leaders who strengthen educator capacity and improve learning opportunities for children. We know what creates that energy and what school leaders can do to create the conditions for students, teachers, parents, and staff to engage.

In response to the question, "Who leads?" you might say the principal is the formal, designated leader of the school. After all, the principal is responsible for establishing direction, developing people, and building the capacity of the school organization.[1] The principal sets the tone and ultimately is responsible for the success or failure of the school. A focus on the leadership of the principal is important because a strong principal is critical to the long-term success of the school.

But focusing narrowly on the principal as the leader of the school ignores the many important contributions of others to the nuanced tapestry of leadership that occurs throughout every school day. Consider this sampling from a day in the life of Truman High School:

7:00–7:45 a.m.: The leadership team meets to work on restructuring the school day to create time for teacher teams to collaborate around student work and problems of practice.

7:50–8:00 a.m.: A student confronts one of his peers in the hallway before class and prevents him from bullying another student.

8:00–8:05 a.m.: In morning announcements, the principal welcomes the school community and elicits feelings of school pride as she reminds them what it means to be a Truman Wildcat!

10:00–11:00 a.m.: The math department chair engages math teachers in an examination of data showing that Truman students who fail freshman math are 80 percent less likely to graduate compared to other students. The team plans a strategy to better support students. They agree to examine the data further and determine what areas of freshman math trip up these students the most.

12:00–12:45 p.m.: A paraprofessional works through lunch to help a student struggling in Spanish class.

2:00–2:45 p.m.: A special educator coteaches with the freshman English teacher to ensure that all students can master the core learning outcomes for the course. They plan to share their experiences and mentor other teacher teams during upcoming staff development time.

3:45–4:30 p.m.: The night janitor comes in early to work with the art teacher to clean up a messy student project designed to spark student creativity and expression.

7:00–8:30 p.m.: The choir director supervises a student rehearsal of *The Wiz* as part of her commitment to creating a welcoming space to engage and support students.

Large and small, these and many other regular acts of leadership contribute to shaping Truman's culture of learning.

Understanding the kind of leadership needed in today's educational environment means thinking in a new way about leaders and leadership. Obviously the principal plays a critical leadership role in the school, but the principal's leadership works by engaging and building leadership capacity throughout the school. In other words, the work of leadership is distributed across educators and through tasks that shape the everyday practices of teaching and learning.

LEADERSHIP AND SPAN OF CONTROL

An interesting difference between schools and businesses is that in schools, the span of control—the number of employees a single supervisor oversees—is about *three times* what it is in business. In business today, a typical manager oversees about 10 employees. But in an average elementary school, one leader oversees 33 employees.[2] The span of control is even larger in secondary schools.

In the past, this organizational design wasn't a major problem because leaders were expected to hire good teachers and let them do their jobs. Teachers were considered to be professionals who operated largely on their own. Expectations of teacher autonomy led school leaders to adopt loose, compliance-based practices of supervision and left professional development to the interests of teachers. Teachers taught, and the responsibility—and the consequences—for learning fell on students.

But an interesting shift occurred with implementation of No Child Left Behind in 2002. This law changed the expectations of schools and school leaders. The law required that over a ten-year period, each succeeding class of students needed to produce at higher and higher levels as measured by standardized test scores. The requirement that schools continuously improve scores over time meant that leaders had to continuously build the skills of educators to produce higher and higher levels of achievement. Leaders could no longer simply control hiring and firing; now they were responsible for improving the ability of educators to refine their practices in order to improve outcomes.

Meanwhile, the span of control didn't get any smaller. In support of these improvement expectations, policymakers adopted new curriculum standards, student assessments, evaluation systems, new approaches to special education, and new approaches to student behavior management. These policies provided guidance and resources for schools to improve, but they also required significant time to reevaluate current practices and consider how to best add these new approaches to the daily work of schools.

Even under the old management model, researchers found that principals' days were packed with a series of brief, fragmented interactions with students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members.[3] The new responsibilities for teacher development come on top of managing campus safety, building and grounds, scheduling, public appearances, budget and finance, welcoming visitors, and building a positive climate. Being the principal of a high school is like being a CEO or a mayor of a medium-sized city.

While the federal No Child Left Behind Act has been replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, the changes in expectations of schools and school leaders ushered in by No Child Left Behind remain. At the core of the new expectations for school leadership is that leaders can help to improve teaching and learning. Teaching is a complex and uncertain skill. A principal can readily manage the basics of teaching—making sure teachers are in the classroom, on task, maintaining order, covering relevant material, and meeting district or state curriculum and safety requirements. But being responsible for moving teaching practice to the next level requires more than passing through a classroom to make sure everything is all right. It requires intensive engagement with data to understand the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom, and making sometimes seemingly small shifts in teaching practice to move learning forward. Most important, it means having the ability to see when teaching is working, when it is not, and knowing what to do to help teachers and learners improve.

LEADER OF LEADERS

In the past, we have thought about leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers. It was the responsibility of the leader to lead and the follower to follow. But we have begun to think about leadership differently. Leadership is not about the relationship between leaders and followers, but the relationship between coleaders and their work.

Schools are service organizations. Anyone who works in a service organization can tell you that the face of the organization is the face of every individual in that organization. When we walk into the bank and talk to the bank teller, he or she is representing the face of that bank. Similarly, when a student has an experience with a teacher in the classroom, that teacher is the face of the school. Because each individual plays such an important role in carrying out the work of the organization, it is important to get everyone on the same page, with the same goals, and the same understandings of how to respond in ways that will move the organization forward. This is a major leadership task for managers in service organizations.

In carrying out the goals of the organization, leadership acts occur all the time and throughout the school. They are carried out by the custodian who makes a connection with a shy student. They are carried out by the school secretary who works with a student to get a message to her parents so she can stay late after school to finish a test. They are carried out by the teacher who seeks feedback and support from other teachers to help him better support student learning. And they are carried out by the student who stands up to confront his peers about a racist remark.

Understanding leadership in this way draws attention away from the role of the leader to the practices that need to be carried out for the school to be effective. It means that the principal doesn't have to have his or her hand in everything that happens in the school. Instead, the principal's role shifts to creating supporting structures and expectations so that many individuals can stand up and take responsibility for carrying out the critical leadership tasks of the school. Mapping leadership means describing how leadership is directed and shared across an organization and guiding the work necessary for effective practice.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

The model that principals alone lead schools is outmoded and increasingly irrelevant. Yet many of our ideas to support and evaluate school leadership are still focused on the principal. We need new ways of thinking that take the shared

and structural nature of school leadership into account. Distributed leadership theory provides a model for us to map school leadership practice.

Distributed leadership theory began in the late 1990s as a way to think about leadership as a set of tasks directed, shared, and enacted across the school organization. It was initially shaped by pioneering work in distributed cognition. The traditions of cognitive psychology emphasized that understanding thinking depended on studying what went on in the heads of actors. Distributed cognition researchers felt that thinking and acting unfolded in interaction with others and with the environment, and that to think about cognition in terms of the individual alone missed the reality of how cognition unfolds in the world.

In his book *Cognition in the Wild*, Edwin Hutchins analyzed how navigators pilot ships.[4] A central concept in distributed cognition theory is the task, a unit of work that organizes the efforts of actors and is supported (or constrained) by the context of action. While a task can be a novel response to an emergent situation, most tasks are repeated in ways that make work familiar to actors. Over time, repeated tasks help actors form routines that guide action. Learning these routines helps new actors become familiar with how to act and think. For expert actors, routines become the critical resource for how to deal with novelty. Routines become the standard operating procedures for navigational teams to handle ordinary events and react effectively to the extraordinary. Over time, the network of routines forms the organizational culture. The culture becomes a self-defining, and self-preserving, force that bends new initiatives and new actors to expected traditions of the way things are done.

Observing ship navigation led Hutchins to describe two key aspects of how tasks unfold in real work. First, navigation is a social act that involves sharing knowledge through the division of tasks and routines with others. The social nature of thinking in action becomes clear when Hutchins considers the work of navigating a navy amphibious assault ship. "Navigation" is not limited to the work of the officer who has the title. Instead, the actions of navigation are shared by actors across the ship in a complex web of information exchange and decision making. These interactions can take place at the same time (synchronous) or across time (asynchronous) as remembered interactions. Even in a lone outrigger on the Pacific Ocean, remembered conversations about how to use the stars as directional aids are fresh in the practices of the pilot. Thinking in action is always, and irreducibly, social.

Hutchins's second observation is facilitated by the context of action. Navigators rely on a variety of instruments, such as a GPS system, and, in earlier days,

sextants and star charts, to guide their work. Without access to these information tools or artifacts, it would be impossible to navigate a ship. Artifacts provide asynchronous guidance to action. Designers build information indicators and knowledge about suggested courses of action into artifacts, such as instruments or policies, that are intended to guide action at some later time to other actors. Of course, some information is typically lost in the distance between the design and the use of such artifacts, which opens up a space for later users to rely on judgment to ascertain the lessons to be drawn from artifacts. Knowing which artifact is appropriate to use when is a key aspect of becoming an expert navigator.

James Spillane and his colleagues adapted key insights from the distributed cognition research to understand the work of school leadership.[5] As with navigation, leadership is concerned with influencing the actions of others. Navigators guide a complex machine—and school leaders engage in a wide variety of tasks to guide the complex mechanisms involved with the social practices of teaching and learning. While teachers engage in the primary work of interacting with students in daily practice, leaders are responsible for providing support, guidance, and resources to ensure that teachers can do their work effectively. When teachers engage in the tasks of organizing work for their colleagues (e.g., through roles such as instructional coaches or department chairs), they too are considered leaders from a distributed perspective. Whoever engages in the work participates in leadership.

The task remains a central concept in distributed leadership. It refers to a unit of work that can be shared across people and supported by the context. Distributed leadership research considers tasks as units of action that constitute practices. Practices refer to how tasks are linked together to form identifiable units of action (e.g., teacher evaluation practices). An important aspect of distributed leadership analysis is to identify the tasks that matter in a given situation.

Distributed leadership, like Hutchins's theory, has two key dimensions. First, leadership is *socially* distributed across the organization. The school principal, of course, is a key actor, but to understand school leadership, we must consider as well the tasks of assistant principals, instructional coaches, special educators, and teachers. These actors sometimes coordinate their work to achieve shared goals, but as often as not, they act independent of one another or even subvert each other's work. The irreducibly political aspects of organizational leadership are shown in how tasks are socially distributed in a school. The tension between leaders and followers is revealed in whether tasks are developed collaboratively

with (or imposed on) followers and in whether the intentions of leaders are seen in the actions of followers.

The second dimension of distributed leadership is that it is also *situationally* distributed across the artifacts of the organization. Leaders use tools such as interventions, policies, procedures, and agendas to coordinate tasks in schools. Sometimes they develop these artifacts on their own, but more often they inherit artifacts from the existing structure of the school (like the daily schedule) or must implement artifacts received from outside the school (like a response to intervention program or a district food service contract). Again, the political dimension of leadership is reflected in the situational distribution of practice. Leaders build or advocate programs, such as common planning time or a library maker space, with features designed to support certain kinds of use.

A sign of a strong, shared culture of learning is that teachers and students use such programs as intended. When artifacts are used in ways not intended by designers or in ways that subvert their intended use, this can typically be regarded as an indicator of political or cultural conflict in the school—either because educators and students disagree with the intended uses or because political conflict between leaders is being expressed through subversion. Taken together, the network of artifacts shapes the context of leadership practice in the school. Leaders interested in improving the organization need to add, remove, or redesign tasks to shape a new context of practice.

In order to make space for new directions for action, school leaders must come to understand that school culture is a result of the collective actions of the people, artifacts, and routines that have shaped the current context. Considering culture as a product of tasks, people, artifacts, interactions, and routines shows a pathway for change. Leaders who can identify how the current school culture allows for new action—which educators are open to innovation, for example, and which artifacts are ripe for replacement and renewal—can trace new directions for action. Having a map of existing tasks opens up opportunities to make sustainable change in schools.

TASKS VERSUS SKILLS

Distributed leadership emphasizes the who (leaders) and the what (tasks) of school leadership. But what about the how? What about the personal and interpersonal abilities and skills necessary to persuade followers to join in, or resolve conflicts, or plan for a successful future? Fortunately, researchers have

abundantly documented the range of abilities and skills need to successfully lead organizations. Some of these aspects, such as charisma and intelligence, are assumed to be necessary characteristics leaders bring to situations. Other aspects, such as time management, planning, and facilitating social interaction, are described as skills that can be acquired with training and practice. In his influential book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes how successful companies have leaders who can assemble high-quality teams, confront hard facts about performance, and focus on what matters to advance the organization.[6] Insights like this have proven inspirational to leaders around the world. Developing these skills and abilities is clearly essential to becoming a successful leader.

If skills are so important, why then does distributed leadership focus on tasks? Distributed leadership research recognizes the abundance of scholarship available on leadership characteristics and also the rich inquiry into how institutional characteristics shape the range of action available to leaders.[7] Because these areas of leadership research are well documented and because books and articles that share these insights are widely available, distributed leadership researchers sought to define a key aspect of practice that was not as well studied—the what of school leadership. As we have seen in our experience as school leadership teachers, developing skills alone does not provide enough guidance to shape successful practice.

In addition to knowing how to communicate and how to focus attention on specific goals, it is also important to know what goals deserve focus. Since every school is unique, yet also shares common features with other schools, the leadership team must be able to ascertain what specific tasks are needed to achieve the larger organizational outcomes. Leaders need to identify, for example, what actions are needed to build professional community in that situation. School leaders need to develop skills and abilities that can, as Jim Collins describes, get the right people on the bus. But determining where that bus should head and which turns it will need to make requires a map that describes the tasks necessary for school improvement.

COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

Distributed leadership helps make the shift from focusing on the work of individuals to the collection of people, interactions, artifacts, and routines. Mapping these practices and considering how their quality varies according to leadership research and practical experience is the subject of this book.

In 2008, we began our inquiry to map the terrain of leadership practices using the ideas of the distributed leadership framework. We developed rubrics that described leadership at different levels of practice. These rubrics supported our inquiry into helping guide the work of school leaders and identifying areas for improvement. We received a $1.6 million, four-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop and validate a survey that would measure the distributed leadership capacity of a school and provide information to help school leaders improve leadership practices.

To create the survey, we translated the rubrics into a survey of practices. We then gathered focus groups of educators from all levels of K–12 schools over a series of months to identify the ways in which these practices varied across school contexts and to fill in the areas where our rubrics were weak. They helped us capture current practices in schools that struggle, schools that are still developing, and model schools. Our goal was to both capture what we know works and ground it in the experiences of current educators.

The result is the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL), a research-based formative assessment of school leadership practices that invites all educators in a school to provide feedback on the tasks that matter for improving student learning. Between 2011 and 2017, we tested CALL in hundreds of schools with thousands of educators. We developed primary school, secondary school, and district-level versions of CALL and validated the instruments by comparing survey results with measures of school climate, leadership effectiveness, and student learning.

Mapping Leadership tells the story of the leadership work that matters for improving teaching and learning in schools. In most cases, schools use the CALL data formatively to plan local school improvement efforts. In this book, we draw on the incredible information resources provided by thousands of educators to describe the leadership practices that matter in their schools. We begin with a tour of the five key domains of leadership practice: developing a focus on learning, monitoring the practices of teaching and learning, developing professional community, acquiring and allocating resources, and providing a safe and effective learning environment. Each chapter integrates a review of relevant research on the key practices in each domain with the findings of the CALL survey. Each chapter then concludes with directions for the kinds of practices that lead toward improved teaching and learning across schools. We intend this book to be used alone or in conjunction with the CALL survey to support measurement and improvement of distributed leadership practices.[8]

Mapping Leadership aims to provide a bridge between the outcomes that matter and the practices that build the conditions to reach these outcomes. Throughout our careers, we have examined the ways in which leadership is carried out in schools that succeed in improving student learning. We have found that CALL helps educators identify the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and focus attention on critical pathways for school improvement. CALL is the only validated formative assessment of distributed leadership designed to support schools in strengthening their capacity for instructional improvement. We hope you enjoy our tour through what we have learned in our work on the CALL project and that our discussion will spark new directions for how you think about leading your school.

NOTES

1. Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2005).
2. Raiford, S.A. (2004).
3. Peterson, K. D. (1989).
4. Hutchins, E. (1995).
5. See, for example, Spillane, J. P. (2006); Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004).
6. Collins, J. (2001).
7. For a review of institutional theory, see Meyer, H. D., & Rowan, B. (2006).
8. Additional information about the survey is available in Appendix A and on our website, www .leadershipforlearning.org.