Chapter 4

Building and Sustaining School Leadership Capacity

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Abstract This chapter presents our approach to building and sustaining leadership capacity with attention to three areas: (1) personal capacity and commitment to growth; (2) interactions and interpersonal capacity grounded in a culture of trust, collective responsibility and appreciation of diversity, and (3) organizational capacity in high functioning teams that take responsibility for a child-centered vision and help diffuse that vision throughout the school. Leadership in high capacity schools incorporates both formal and informal leadership capacities (Mitchell and Sackney, 2009). Team leadership is essential for building and sustaining leadership capacity in a shared direction for continuous school development and diffusion of educational improvements throughout the school. As formal leaders leave to take on new positions in the district or elsewhere, the shared direction and culture of continuous improvement helps to sustain progress. In this chapter, we discuss our experiences with building and sustaining leadership capacity in *teams* that work to develop and diffuse a shared direction for continuous school development. We begin with a discussion of the research-based content from ISSPP and other studies that informed our project. The balance of the chapter presents application in our research-practice approach in the Arizona project (AZILDR) as well as lessons learned with case examples.

Keywords High-Functioning teams · Personal · Interpersonal · Organizational capacity

“As far as our PLCR leadership team, the ideas and what you’ve presented here have allowed us to pretty much congeal what we’ve been working on. All of a sudden it sparks something. It sparks something or if we’re working on something and you have us go through an exercise and all of a sudden, oh this is a problem we were working on and all of

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a sudden oh, we've got a solution for it. We're saving up those papers ...It's kind of perfect. We're working on discipline, then the article today was talking about safety and discipline and instructional strategies we've been working on. It's kind of like we're progressing hand in hand, or what I see this training has enabled us to do is become a team. Before we were every two weeks for 30 minutes before school. Where we weren't given time to gel, to use your word, to become a unit. Then what we do, then we take it back to our teams. The last training here we had been was the close reading, I think, was one of the things that was offered. We went back and we have our thing ready to go. Our district took our Tuesday, so then we couldn't do it, but we're ready to roll. Basically it's ready to go. We're picking up on the strategies you're showing up here and we're applying them. And sharing them in our PLCs." -Teacher

This chapter presents our approach to building and sustaining leadership capacity with attention to three areas: (1) personal capacity and commitment to growth; (2) interactions and interpersonal capacity grounded in a culture of trust, collective responsibility and appreciation of diversity, and (3) organizational capacity in high functioning teams that take responsibility for a child-centered vision and helps diffuse that vision throughout the school. Leadership in high capacity schools incorporates both formal and informal leadership capacities (Mitchell and Sackney, 2009). In this chapter, we discuss our experiences with building and sustaining leadership capacity in *teams* that work to develop and diffuse a shared direction for continuous school development. We begin with a discussion of the research-based content from ISSPP and other studies that informed our project. The balance of the chapter presents application in our research-practice approach in the Arizona project (AZILDR) as well as lessons learned with case examples.

Leadership Capacity Defined for School Development

Our understanding of leadership capacity has been adapted from ISSPP cases, related leadership research, the work of Mitchell and Sackney (2009) on practices associated with sustainable improvement in high-capacity schools, as well as conceptual understandings about sustainable *education* improvements and our own experiences in Arizona. As noted in Chap. 1, ISSPP cases demonstrated the importance of building leadership capacity to school success with strands that examined sustainability of educational improvements over time. To review these major findings, principals of successful schools with sustainable improvements over 5 years or more, used the following common practices: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). And while these findings are very important to guide new and seated principals toward school success over time, the findings are limited in terms of leadership capacity or *how* new leaders or leaders of struggling schools, particularly those in culturally diverse communities, make and sustain school changes over time. For this understanding of leadership capacity, we looked to Mitchell and Sackney (2009).

Mitchell and Sackney (2009) conducted interviews and observations in Canadian schools over a 10-year period and identified seven themes that must drive practices

for sustainable improvement in an era of accountability; (1) shared vision, values and goals inclusive of all voices; (2) collaborative work culture; (3) collective learning and shared understanding; (4) a focus on reflective practice and experimentation, (5) presence of knowledge systems and data-based decision-making; (6) communities of leaders; and (7) a culture of high trust. Schools with evidence of all seven themes developed into high capacity learning communities and improved student learning and achievement. Mitchell and Sackney clustered these seven themes into three embedded but interactive layers of capacity building leadership necessary to develop the school organization into high capacity learning communities: building people, building commitments, and building schools. Building people or personal capacity was defined as a commitment to growth, expressed in a desire to help others to grow as they have grown. Building interpersonal capacity is based on the development of deep trust, collective responsibility, and appreciating diversity. Collaboration is developed through working together in teams and teachers understand the value of professional and authentic teamwork. Conflict is not ignored within collaboration but embraced as a learning opportunity to engage in honest, respectful deliberation and dialogue that encourages active listening, inquiry, and reflection. Organizational capacity is based in building networks, knowledge systems, leadership infrastructure, and organization.

Further, we extended leadership notions of capacity to include conceptual understandings from education traditions, including those applied in the U.S. by John Dewey. We will expand on this point in subsequent chapters, but it is important to note that we draw on education traditions as well as organizational theories and leadership approaches to work with people and the human relations and interrelations necessary for school development at any level, particularly culturally diverse schools.

Thus, in summary, we worked to develop groups as leadership teams for sustained school development in terms of personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacity for education within the Zone of Uncertainty. Team leadership is essential for building and sustaining leadership capacity in a shared direction for continuous school development and diffusion of educational improvements throughout the school. As formal leaders leave to take on new positions in the district or elsewhere, the shared direction and culture of continuous improvement helps to sustain progress. For AZiLDR, we worked with a leadership group (formal leaders, teacher leaders, coaches, district representatives) to take on the characteristics and dispositions of an educational leadership team. We drew on Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) synthesis of leadership practices in successful schools to include setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program, findings from ISSPP cases that supported Leithwood and Riehl's model, as well as Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) understanding of formal and informal leadership capacity in schools. As we describe in the next section, our application in school development (AZiLDR) extended this research with understandings about how leadership teams build and sustain capacity for school development over time.

Application

Throughout the Institutes and Regional Meetings, school teams engaged in a variety of activities designed to assist them to build capacity within their leadership teams, and ultimately at their school sites. First, teams explored the stages of group development, (1) dependency and inclusion, (2) counterdependency and fight, (3) trust and structure, and (4) work (Wheelan, 2013). They then examined the ten keys to productivity: goals; roles; interdependence; leadership; communication and feedback; discussion, decision-making and planning; implementation and evaluation; norm and individual differences; structure; and cooperation and conflict management (Wheelan, 2013). Each individual was asked to complete the Organizational Support Checklist (Wheelan, 2013), which elicited a grade of A, B or C for the overall organization as well as for each section. Individuals then divided into job-alike groups (principals, teachers, and District support) to discuss their similarities and differences as well as next steps that they might take. School teams then regrouped to look at the stage of development for their team, strategies for moving forward, and most importantly, how to think about and use the concepts of team development at their own sites. These activities, including the subsequent ones, provided teams with the tools to address their needs within the Zone of Uncertainty.

Teams were introduced to the structures and processes of professional learning communities, using the video set, *Collaborative Teams in Professional Learning Communities: Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2010). Leadership teams learned how to structure professional learning communities at their own sites to focus on learning, embedding time for collaboration within the school day.

In conjunction with understanding how to create, structure and monitor professional learning communities, teams were instructed in how to deal with conflict and resistance. The video set, *Leading Difficult Conversations: Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour and DuFour, 2011) prepared the team to address resistance, both around the work of PLCs as well as other changes that were being made. Schools received the video set for use in training their own staff. Understanding the change process involved in implementing professional learning communities effectively was imperative. Thus, we shared information on the Change Analysis Framework (Foord and Haar, 2008), asking participants to analyze their own situations and apply the 6 step process to their own needs. Innovation configuration maps (Hord and Roussin, 2013) were utilized to assist teams in planning for implementation of change efforts.

Time was also devoted to ensuring that both principals and other team members had the skills to coach their colleagues. We focused on how to give appropriate feedback, as well as understanding blended coaching and triple loop learning (Bloom et al., 2005). Participants were asked to use an example of Triple Loop Learning that needs to occur in their schools to develop the two to three next steps they could take prior to the following Regional Meeting. The were to present and discuss the results of those next steps at that Regional Meeting.

Finally, it should be noted that team planning for diffusion of content was provided at every Institute and Regional Meeting. The expectation was that they would apply and extend the learning to their entire staff. It should also be noted that teams were reminded and encouraged to consider evidence in terms of humanistic education as well as student outcomes.

Lessons Learned

In the following cases, we illustrate two examples of different ways that diffusion occurred and was supported (or not).

Case A: *Venture Inc.*

A small charter school in southern Arizona serving grades K-8, Venture, Inc. is located in a rural community. The student body is mostly White (77%) and low income (83%). Proficiency scores in both English/Language Arts and Math fall below the state average, at 29% and 25% respectively. The school is comprised of several modular buildings, connected with concrete walkways. Although not required by Arizona law, all of their teachers hold state certification, and 50% have 3 or more years of teaching experience. The school founder and executive director (principal), Mr. Vellan is a white male in his sixties. His main interest in participating in the school development project was to share the leadership in the hopes that he could someday retire.

This small team was comprised of the principal and two teachers. Since the school only had 6 teachers, the commitment to development was sincere. Observing the team at work was different than most, in that the principal made the conscious decision to not take the lead, but rather to allow the teachers to do so. When asked, Mr. Vellan would provide feedback or ideas, but tried to stay more in the background.

The teachers at this site rose to the challenge, taking the lead both during training and with staff when they returned to school. Even 3 years after the training ended, teachers continued to take the lead, with Mr. Vellan acting as cheerleader. He wrote: "Each Wednesday we work as a team to focus or refine the execution of a feature of our overarching mission: (1) Standards based instruction informed by relevant and timely data; (2) Our instructional framework Readers, Writers, Science and Math Workshop); (3) Building resiliency in students. Thank you, Margaret Hunter, Yvette Suni, Cathy Black for sharing expertise and coaching us as we apply the learning. And thank you, Susie, Tarrin, Lucy, DV, Kris, Lacey, Donald for sticking to it and for steadily improving "The Venture Way". Awesome is overused – so, how about a dose of "inspirational" with all that awe inspiring work and expertise."

Building capacity at this site was the purpose for their participation and was evident long after the project ended.

Case B: *Alexander High School*

Alexander High School is a comprehensive urban public high school serving approximately 1200 students. The student make-up is predominantly Hispanic (63%), followed by 18% White, 10% Black, 4% Asian, 3% Native American and 1% two or more races. Approximately 72% of the students come from low income homes. The school has a 71% four-year graduation rate, although this falls slightly below the state average. Academic performance, as measured on the state test, indicates that only 22% of students are proficient in English and 20% in Math; this falls significantly below the state average. And yet, the school as a whole has currently received a letter grade of B from the state of Arizona, based on its rate of growth.

“The principal, Jeffrey Long, has served in that capacity since 2011. He began his career at Alexander High School as a teacher, then served as assistant principal and principal for several years at different district schools. Jeffrey is of Native American heritage, and believes deeply that all students can grow and succeed. At the time of his entry into the AZiLDR school development project, Alexander High School was rated a D school, and Mr. Long was seeking ways to assist them to improve.”

During the course of the project, both the district representative and several of Jeffrey’s team expressed frustration with his unwillingness to share the load and trust in his team. Jeffrey believed he had to take charge of all areas of improvement, and did not seem to recognize the expertise of his team members. About halfway through the trainings, after diving deeply into the professional learning community model, Mr. Long changed his behaviors. He then embraced the concept of professional learning communities, turning the leadership of the process over to the leadership team. As one teacher stated, “It was a turning point in the work of the team; we were finally able to feel like a part of the process.”

Final Thoughts

In order to truly build capacity at a school site, it is imperative that the leader be ready and willing to share the leadership. In one of the cases presented above, the leader was ready; in the other case, he was more hesitant, and it took time for him to understand that his role was to facilitate and encourage leadership in others. No single person is able to effect change without the support, help and willingness of others.

Additionally, in order to diffuse learning throughout the organization, it is essential to have teacher leaders with influence among their peers. Many times, school leaders want to choose only those individuals who agree with them, but in reality, it is necessary to include individuals who question and disagree, especially if they are influential at the site. Having them closely involved with the planning allows the team to anticipate issues, and address them early. Understanding the change process is critical to success, which includes understanding the stages of the change process

itself as well as being able to assess the progress of individual staff members within that change process. Being able to support all staff to continue to grow and increase their own capacity is vital to success. Navigating the Zone of Uncertainty to embrace continual and sustainable school development is a team effort; leadership must be shared.

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