

# DEVELOPING TEACHING EXPERTISE



A GUIDE TO  
ADAPTIVE  
PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING DESIGN

RYAN DUNN • JOHN HATTIE

CORWIN

*Thank you*

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from  
Developing Teaching Expertise, by Ryan Dunn and John  
Hattie.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

## CHAPTER 2

# Leading Teacher Learning

Over the last ten years, researchers in the field of teacher professional learning have realized that passively disseminating research – “packaging and posting” – is unlikely to have a significant impact on people’s behaviors (Nutley et al., 2007). Like so many aspects of working in schools, the application of research is emerging as a largely social process, with personal interactions and relationships being key factors in determining how evidence gets used and applied in practical settings. Having the opportunity to discuss research helps practitioners gain a deeper understanding and sense of ownership of the findings and, in doing so, enables them to integrate evidence more relevantly and sensitively in professional settings (Cooper, 2010).

In this respect, it is unsurprising that collaborative approaches that support direct engagement and dialogue between researchers and practitioners are proving to be particularly effective (Nutley et al., 2007). As such, our notion of knowledge mobilization in education requires extending beyond

just communicating research to looking at how it is effectively engaged with and applied to practice. A key principle is to move beyond the pursuit of novel and new practices and instead focus intently on improving student learning.

A key principle is to move beyond the pursuit of novel and new practices and instead focus intently on improving student learning.

As Robinson (2017) highlighted, not all change leads to improvement. Because of this, the difficult part is not the decision to pursue evidence-informed practices; the complexity is in the implementation and mobilization of research evidence. With school-level implementation of evidence-informed practices, there is no predetermined recipe for success that can be replicated to ensure success. What might have been successful in one school may miss the mark in another. While the evidence base may be solid, the fact remains that learners are different with respect to their prior knowledge, beliefs, needs, and/or motivations to participate, and this can change everything (Kirschner & Surma, 2020).

## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Globally, teachers are accountable for growing expectations around progress in student learning. In the Australian context, schools are being asked to ensure growth in skills, knowledge, and capabilities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014) for an increasingly diverse group of learners; analyze and adopt data-driven practices; and gather evidence of student progress in learning. These intersecting pressures are creating substantial challenges for teachers, who are often only provided with one-off workshops highlighting “best practices,” which in many cases add to the complexity of their work rather than support the development of their expertise.

There is increasing agreement that there are no ready-made instructional solutions that can simply be replicated to cater to unique classroom and school contexts. There will always need to be consideration of current levels of expertise and sensitivity to the pre-existing practices within a school. This creates often-overlooked complexities in school-improvement work, with the potential for unanticipated responses and consequences (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000; Miller & Page, 2007). As evidenced by Dunn et al. (2019), an approach that enables groups of teachers to collaboratively design, implement, and evaluate practices has clear benefits for teachers and their students.

While the growing educational research evidence base can support the design of frameworks and interventions based on pedagogic best practices (e.g., Evidence for Learning, 2017; Hattie, 2009), the core challenge is to ensure best practices can be delivered with increasing levels of expertise and, therefore, impact. As such, leaders should approach teacher professional learning with a commitment to continually developing teachers' expertise.

If leaders embrace and explore the complexity of best practices, then the approach will most likely end with teachers gaining more than a superficial understanding of those practices. In other words, teachers will have the opportunity not only to understand *what* the practice is, but also to understand *why* the practice is important for student learning. The best way for teachers to learn these practices is over plenty of time, with support, and with clear impact measures and meta-cognitive processes built in so that the subtlety, nuance, and connections to other practices can be understood and leveraged. Teacher professional learning that cultivates this mindset is more likely to develop the sophisticated teacher practices that will cater to the diverse contexts and classrooms inherent in every school system.

In the complex and rapidly changing world we live in, the ability to constantly adapt and respond to varied contexts is more critical than ever. School leadership is more akin to improvised art forms than many would imagine. As Heifetz et al. (2009) articulated:

Everything you do in leading adaptive change is an experiment. Many people, however, choose not to see it that way, feeling and succumbing to the enormous pressure to produce certain results from their actions. Framing everything as an experiment offers you more running room to try new strategies, to ask questions, to discover what's essential, what's expendable, and what innovation can work. (p. 277)

Heifetz et al. highlight that although an implementation strategy is evidence of your commitment to improvement, it is not necessarily the solution on how to get from one point to another. The experimental mindset involves testing a hypothesis, looking for contrary data, and making course corrections as you generate new knowledge. Adaptive practices are best suited to complex environments, such as educational settings, where there is a need to test and discover. Ideas and solutions may have been formulated in advance, yet a great deal of learning, reflection, and understanding is still required. In this instance, forming a detailed linear plan will make only limited sense, because we know things will most likely turn out differently when we begin learning from early implementation. A clear goal is still necessary, and a pathway to improvement should still be developed (see expertise pathways in Chapter 3); however, there is a clear understanding that learning and adapting within this place will be integral to success.

Think of a sailing ship heading north using Polaris, the North Star, to guide its journey. The ship's captain has a clear direction in mind but may veer in other directions as needed to

catch the wind that will most effectively move the ship in the proposed northerly direction. The destination is clear, but a linear pathway is not the most effective to take. An **adaptive mindset** understands that taking the first step is important, because once we take that first step, we then discover the most appropriate second step. Research has illustrated that adaptive practices, in which school-based solutions are collaboratively designed, implemented, and evaluated, have definite benefits for teaching practice (Dunn et al., 2019).

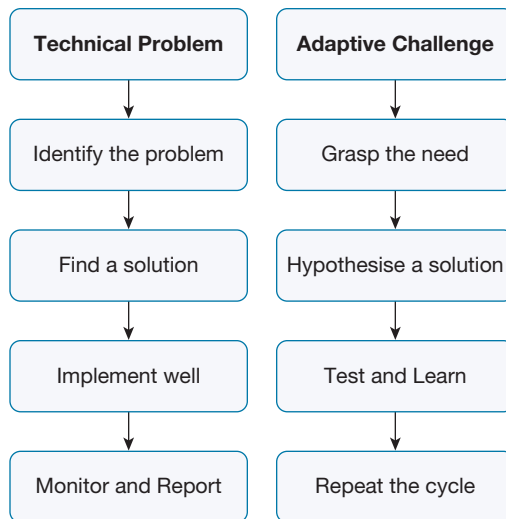
Ultimately, school-improvement work is an ongoing journey, and each school is unique, so there is never going to be an improvement path that is so constraining that adjustments are not required as the improvement journey unfolds. To advocate for this would be an oversimplification of the complexity within which schools work. With that said, we have developed and tested the ideas put forward in this chapter in a diverse range of schools in different systems and countries. They are evidence-driven interventions, designed to be customizable to your specific education context.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) popularized the idea of two distinct types of improvement efforts in any organization: technical problems and adaptive challenges. A technical problem is one that can be solved with existing knowledge and skills. Solutions to technical problems are achieved by implementing routines and standard operating procedures with rigor and fidelity.

A school-based example of a technical problem is the procedure used for a fire drill. School leaders identify fire-drill procedure as an area in which they need to be more efficient; they develop a solution, implement it well, then monitor and report on the process. The key aspect is rigid adherence to a predetermined (and possibly co-designed) process or procedure. A directive leadership approach is often the most efficient and effective way to solve technical problems.

Adaptive challenges require moving beyond what you – at a school-wide or an individual level – currently know, understand, and do. Although you might be able to hypothesize a possible solution, you will still need to test and learn through iterative cycles to establish a workable context-specific solution (see Figure 2.1). By definition, adaptive challenges do not lend themselves to obvious solutions, and school leaders need an organizational strategy for dealing with the complexity that adaptive challenges surface.

**FIGURE 2.1** Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges



The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example of a global adaptive challenge for governments, businesses, communities, and schools. This incredibly complex problem meant we could not rely on implementing a previously identified solution or response. The problem of how to influence complex situations toward favorable outcomes, and away from unfavorable ones, was arguably at the core of the important and difficult challenges we faced. As nations across the world rapidly attempted to design solutions based on

emerging information and needs, they often approached it as an iterative testing and learning cycle. As new evidence emerged, leaders hypothesized solutions, implemented strategies, and sought evidence of implementation and impact. Next steps were then determined, based on early impact evidence. This cycle enabled a rapid response but also created an environment in which we knew things could change based on new data. Adaptive leadership practices were best suited to respond to this significant challenge.

As schools embark on their improvement journey, they will no doubt encounter both technical problems and adaptive challenges. Interestingly, early improvement efforts may see school leaders make significant gains by using a directive approach and addressing technical problems by creating consistent planning templates, developing and implementing a school-wide instructional model, and establishing clear learning protocols. However, often these efforts reach an expertise ceiling: there may be consistency in the initial implementation, in which the teachers are all working in the same way, but evolving into the next level of work might not be clear. This can occur when there is rigid adherence to rules and procedures, rather than a view of the school as a dynamic organization seeking to continually respond to students' needs and changing contextual factors. As a result, consistency can mean performance begins to plateau. Mourshed et al. (2010) discussed this phenomenon at a system level and noted that while leaders might observe early gains through a more directive and technical approach, these usually do not sustain over the long term. So, while the need to implement something like a new reporting system might be best approached as a technical problem through a directive leadership lens, other problems should be approached through an adaptive lens.

However, as Heifetz and Laurie (1997) highlighted, working adaptively is not a silver bullet for education. It is definitely not the solution to all challenges that arise in schools. Adaptive



ways of working are best suited to situations in which there is significant uncertainty and considerable elements of the improvement initiative are still to be discovered. In essence, working adaptively is ideal for *complex* situations in which you have a strong sense that a linear pathway is not likely to occur. If there seems to be uncertainty around what might work and how it might be implemented, the level and degree of uncertainty can give clues as to how adaptive approaches could be effective. Embracing the concept of complex adaptive systems provides a valuable toolkit for understanding and addressing a broad range of educational issues. Chapter 4 explores how to cultivate adaptive ways of thinking and working within a team setting.

## PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

### The Role of School Leaders in Teacher Professional Learning

School leaders make a very real difference to student learning and achievement. But because their influence is usually indirect, it has often been difficult to link their actions directly to student outcomes (Hopkins et al., 2011). Fortunately, recent research has explored the connection between leadership and learning.

The role of an effective school leader is one of many diverse stances. An effective leader is aware of different leadership practices and knows when and how to apply them depending on the situation. Everything is undertaken with the purpose of helping teachers understand and apply improved instructional practices.

To effectively lead teacher professional learning, school leaders need to employ adaptive approaches that enable them to respond, adjust, and refine their work based on emerging evidence from their improvement efforts. School leaders need to consider how to give teachers the opportunity to deliberately

and intentionally embed new practices over time, so that subtlety, nuance, and connections to other evidence-informed instructional practices are not only understood, but also leveraged. We have found that creating the structures, skills, and dispositions required to engage in rapid-cycle improvement is a key lever for both immediate and sustained success.

Leading an organization to become more adaptive in the way it approaches teacher learning requires developing specific leadership skills, attitudes, and collaborative structures that enable and foster adaptive performance. In other words, school leaders need to develop an adaptive stance; they should be constantly looking for ways to test their knowledge about the teaching and learning within their unique school context.

An adaptive stance is both an intellectual stance that creates the preconditions for being adaptive and a particular pattern of decision-making in complex situations (Grisogono & Radenovic, 2007). Operational adaptability is essential to developing situational understanding and to the ability to work through complex situations as they arise. Although it is impossible to anticipate the precise dynamics of the future, cultivating adaptive leadership should enable schools to react quickly to rapidly changing conditions and seize upon unforeseen opportunities.

## Cultivating Adaptive Ways of Working and Thinking

As a response to a rapidly changing and complex world, many organizations are actively exploring methods in which they can become more adaptive and nimble in their approach. While they might be drawing on similar guiding principles and approaches, there is no one way this looks in practice. “Adaptive” is both a framework and a capability that includes a set of principles and practices. In our work over the past decade with school leaders who have sought to

utilize adaptive ways of working, some key tenets to consider have become apparent:

- *Develop a mindset of acceptance.* We need to accept the complexity of the environment we are working within. As a leader, you need to accept ambiguity and uncertainty; by doing this, you can begin to understand that nothing remains static and we are constantly evolving. This mindset will help you deal with the unexpected, because you will accept the unexpected as a normal part of working within complexity.
- *Empower teachers to respond to their unique context.* Adaptive leaders continually search for impediments that may be hindering the growth of their teaching teams and endeavor to solve these. They support teaching teams to make rapid progress by helping them self-organize and make decisions that are responsive to their context and based on best evidence. They do not leave responsibility entirely with teachers and are still part of the decision-making process, but they view one of their primary roles as supporting teachers to be able to do the work they need to do. They exhibit practices such as deep listening, self-awareness, and commitment to others.
- *Develop the situation through action.* When exploring adaptive challenges, effective leaders understand that solutions are being developed from an incomplete evidence base. Complex situations entail inevitable uncertainty. As such, school leaders should be prepared to develop the situation through action. An adaptive mindset understands that taking the first step is important, because in taking that first step, we discover what the most appropriate second step might be.
- *Focus on teams, not individuals.* Studies by the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence (<http://cci.mit.edu>) illustrate that although the intelligence of individuals affects team performance, the team's collective intelligence is more

important. These studies also suggest it is easier to change team behaviors than individual behaviors as a driver for improvement.

- *Design lean improvement processes.* Lean improvement processes are achieved by attempting to come up with the leanest solution that might lead to improvement. By keeping the process as lean as possible, the aim is to prototype a practice by minimizing the required resources, to rapidly discover whether the proposed practices are proving to be effective in your unique context. Consider the approach that educational systems took when moving to remote teaching as a response to COVID-19. Practices were rapidly trialed; the efficacy of these practices was quickly established; and practices were continued, refined, or put on hold as further investigation took place.
- *Foster psychological safety.* Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or to his or her belief that he or she will not be seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive for choosing to take risks. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea (Edmondson, 2012). This is expressed through specific behaviors, such as encouraging teachers to express opinions and ideas, promoting collaborative decision-making, supporting information sharing and teamwork, and being non-judgmental (Chen et al., 2011). Some specific actions to foster psychological safety can be found in the Action Items in Chapter 5.

## STORY FROM THE FIELD

Two key principles for cultivating **collaborative expertise** are to ensure that the group has agency over the process and to

ensure the transparency of decision-making processes. It is important not to fall into cumulative conversations in which everyone simply agrees with one another, causing the group to explore and then implement suboptimal strategies. At this point, the team should engage in exploratory conversations and critical investigation of ideas. This relies on the group members analyzing, critiquing, and challenging the ideas and practices they are considering. Since this is easier said than done, how can a leader support teacher teams to work in such a way? The work of school leaders at Graceville State School provides key insights.

Graceville State School, an elementary school located in the southern part of Brisbane, Australia, opened in 1928 and since that time has been providing high-quality educational experiences aligned to the school motto, “Strive to Excel.” Recently, principal Zoe Smith has led it through significant improvement work on evidence-informed practices, by carefully designing experiences that cultivate a shared vision. She is a thoughtful educational leader who cares deeply about improvement initiatives that are developed and co-owned by her school community. Below, she describes her experience in developing community agency and collaborative decision-making as a foundation for meaningful [teacher inquiry](#).

## Developing Group Agency and Collaborative Decision-Making at Graceville State School

By Zoe Smith, principal

### ESTABLISHING STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOR TEACHER INQUIRY

Two years ago, we embarked on a journey to develop a school-wide approach to the teaching and learning of writing that would meet the needs of our school community. From the outset, we understood this to be an adaptive challenge where we would

need to engage in cycles of rapid inquiry to develop a context-specific solution. To begin this process, we sought a small group of committed educators who were curious to learn and connect as a community of inquirers, with the intent of trialing new writing practices that would form the basis for a school-wide approach to writing. The team that was established was a vertical team of fifteen educators across our elementary school community.

The team began by discussing and establishing a common purpose and group norms to underpin their collaborative inquiry. The team discussed the importance of establishing a shared direction in this work and developed explicit norms about how they would communicate, review evidence, implement ideas, challenge each other, and make collaborative decisions. The team developed the following terms of reference for their collective work:

As an open-minded writing team, we will collaboratively research, consult and challenge to reach democratic decisions that will inspire passionate and influential student authors. As a group, we will advocate for the decisions made and support implementation within the school community.

With this in mind, they began to work together to design the inquiry approach they would use to frame their learning journey. Positioning themselves as inquirers, they understood they could only plan so far ahead and had to be comfortable living with uncertainty, knowing that through the testing and learning implementation cycles they needed to keep the big picture of where they were going in mind; responding to what was revealed to them through their learning would inform and guide the essential next step to take. This was a key learning: implementation is not a linear process, and we need to respond to early implementation.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

As a school leader, I was aware how critical the step would be to ensure that teachers were comfortable working within this ambiguous space when exploring writing practices. It became clear this step required strong support and reassurance from school leadership to ensure that the teachers genuinely explored new practices rather than exploring things that might have been safe but not necessarily led to improved writing practices among students. We wanted teachers to embark on a journey to genuinely stretch their expertise and trial new evidence-informed writing practices to determine their efficacy in our context, not report on the status quo.

### WHAT WE DID

After co-designing the approach the team would undertake to explore a range of practices in writing, the team began to formulate a set of understandings and goals as a way to stay focused on what they were specifically trying to achieve. After the diverse perspectives of the team were explored, this was distilled into a guiding question to drive the collaborative inquiry: “What makes an effective author?”

The first part of the inquiry cycle saw the team *tuning in to* the *current reality* of the school and the broader educational environment in relation to writing. The team broke into groups to explore current understandings of what made an effective author, being sure to seek and gather evidence from a wide range of sources, including known federal and state documents, teachers’ professional knowledge, parents’ practical local knowledge and experiences, and student focus groups.

The team organized a series of real-life experiences with known authors for students, teachers, and parents/carers within the school community, the outcome of which was quite profound and resulted in a rich array of feedback that was included as an equally important piece of evidence for the team to consider. The

team made the decision to share the findings of the first phase of their inquiry with the school community. To the team's delight, the interest was overwhelming.

The impact of the Author provocation had "lit a fire" inside the majority of the school community, and interest in the inquiry into writing grew even more once all members of the school community could see how their thinking and voice had been included as part of the process. Agency and empowerment emerged as a key theme to building a movement behind the work. The team could see that if they continued to keep the wider community included and informed, it was likely there would be continued engagement and ownership.

In relation to the teaching staff, the sharing session excited teachers to engage and put forward ideas of known approaches that could support the aspirations the community consultation had identified. Teachers who were not on the writing team were also eager to explore different evidence-informed approaches to the teaching of writing and experiment with them in their classrooms. This led to thirteen unique approaches to writing put forward for the team to consider. The next step in the collaborative inquiry had been clearly revealed: What mixture of approaches would best suit our unique context?

As the team entered the "finding out" phase of the inquiry, they realized they could not deeply analyze and implement all thirteen proposed approaches to see which one worked best. So, they broke into smaller teams and undertook a mixture of researching the evidence base for the approaches, visiting schools that were implementing the approach for insights, and testing promising approaches within their own classrooms. After ten weeks, the team reconvened to share and sort out their learnings and identify any questions they still had.

To support the evaluation, the team created a matrix of evidence aligned with the identified key goals and understandings. This

*(Continued)*



(Continued)

matrix was a useful visual tool for determining the approaches that would be best able to meet the needs identified by our school community. As the team started to discuss and justify the relevance of each approach, different team members began to form a hierarchy of importance related to the different goals. We wondered what this was telling us. Were our beliefs and assumptions about the teaching and learning of writing now being revealed? At this point, the team decided to share the findings with the wider teaching staff and ask them to apply the matrix. The team was curious to see whether the rest of the staff would have a similar reaction. Once again, a range of beliefs started to emerge. It became quite clear we needed to inquire into underpinning beliefs about the teaching and learning of writing in order for us to move forward as a teaching group.

The tangible outcomes were far from what the team had anticipated at the beginning of the inquiry; however, the process was more powerful and deeply owned by the school community. The team's action to move the school forward was not any one program or approach but a guiding set of agreed-upon beliefs, with statements of what the beliefs would look like when enacted in the classroom. Underpinning the document were a range of best practices the team had identified from their research that aligned with the beliefs. The next critical step was to support the teachers in revising their own practices to align with the newly established guiding beliefs. The school moved to an adaptive growth model, which puts both teacher and student learning at the heart of what we do.

## **KEY LEARNINGS AND RESULTS**

As inquirers, when we started on the journey, we knew it could be a long one with many twists and turns. We were surprised at the final outcome, however, and believe the action taken to be the best outcome for all members of the school community. As a school, we will continue to use reflective inquiry processes to debrief our

progress and affirm or adapt as necessary. The purpose of our inquiry was to make a difference in outcomes and experiences that matter for our learners. As evidenced through this Story From the Field, the writing team's inquiry fostered curiosity, engagement, and community ownership among writers at all levels across our school. As a result, we have seen students achieve higher levels of sophistication in their writing on both school-based and standardized assessments. Our teachers remain professionally curious about our writing practices, and they continue to engage with and learn through our adaptive process; we anticipate continued improvement in student learning as a result.

## ACTION ITEMS

While working with school leaders, we discovered that in addition to a focus on developing adaptive practices, effective leaders draw on other leadership styles depending on the issue they are working through. These styles include instructional leader, servant leader, and adaptive leader. Effective leaders of teacher professional learning employ these three styles at different phases in their improvement work. Collectively, they have the power to define, implement, respond to, and maintain changes that bring about improved teaching expertise and, in turn, sustainable school improvement. Each has a distinct purpose, but when used together, they complement each other to support the development and implementation of effective pedagogical practices. In Table 2.1, we briefly define each of the leadership styles before offering key characteristics associated with each for you to consider within your own leadership practice.

### Leading With an Adaptive Stance

Adaptive leaders actively look to empower their colleagues – not as a form of distributed managerialism in which teachers

**TABLE 2.1** Leadership Styles

LEADERSHIP STYLE	KEY PURPOSE FOR LEADING TEACHER LEARNING
Adaptive leadership	To empower teaching teams to respond to complexity through incremental, iterative improvement practices. An adaptive leader promotes responsive implementation and uses <b>formative evidence</b> to drive expertise development.
Servant leadership	To be responsive to contextual needs by removing impediments to teacher learning. A servant leader strives to build an enabling environment that allows teachers to focus on their professional learning needs.
Instructional leadership	To promote and participate in teacher learning and development. An instructional leader is curious about and deeply engaged in dialogue about effective teaching and learning practices.

are burdened with administrative tasks, but as a way to raise the level of autonomy and responsibility of those they work with. This is expressed through specific behaviors, such as encouraging teachers to express opinions and ideas, promoting collaborative decision-making, and supporting information sharing and teamwork (Chen et al., 2011).

Adaptive leaders seek to mobilize knowledge quickly, are responsive to contextual needs, and seek to empower their colleagues to act – even when the path is unclear and the journey might be messy. Due to this, an adaptive school is able to respond swiftly to rapidly changing opportunities and demands as they occur, making it more efficient and effective in addressing the learning needs of its students.

Leading adaptive processes is an alternative to more traditional top-down management styles. Adaptive leadership is an approach that helps teams respond to unpredictability

through incremental, repeated learning practices. At its core, adaptive approaches use an iterative structure consisting of short, focused learning cycles. During an iterative learning cycle, teams define the work, ensure the planned work takes place through daily interactions and routines, reflect on what has been undertaken and the utility of the intervention, and ultimately measure the merit of the design before moving through another iteration. **Adaptive teams** have a relentless focus on improving teaching practice and the achievement of the students they teach. They are committed to working in collaborative improvement cycles using evidence-informed approaches that meet contextual needs. (For further details on specific improvement structures to support the implementation of adaptive practices, see Chapter 1.) While working closely with leaders who display adaptive leadership practices, we developed the following characteristics to describe the way they work. Consider these characteristics, and compare them to how you currently lead school-improvement work.

## Key Characteristics of Adaptive Leaders

- Encourage teaching teams to be responsive to the specific needs of their students
- Display humility by seeking to learn from different viewpoints and opinions
- Willingly adjust plans and strategies in response to formative evidence, rather than sticking to what was predicted
- Create an environment to test school-improvement ideas through short action and learning cycles
- Emphasize the importance of focusing on the school's long-term vision by promoting action-oriented behavior (What are we doing now to work toward long-term goals?)
- Personally invest in school-improvement work

## Utilizing Servant Leadership Principles

*Servant leadership* can be quite a polarizing term, as it certainly engenders a power shift in which it is a school leader's job to serve all within the community. However, this would be a simplistic interpretation of a servant leader, and one fraught with danger of burnout for school leaders pulled in many directions under the guise of serving their community.

A servant leader is more accurately depicted as a leader who is continually looking for impediments that may hinder the growth of his or her teaching teams and endeavoring to remove these obstacles. A servant leader understands that for teacher learning to occur, there is a need for processes and structures that allow teacher learning to flourish. This leadership style strives to build the “enabling conditions” by removing barriers to teacher collaboration and growth.

A servant leader exhibits practices such as deep listening, self-awareness, and commitment to others. He or she does not direct the team by telling team members what to do. Instead, he or she supports the team to make rapid progress by helping them self-organize and make decisions that are responsive to their context and based on evidence. The enabling conditions need to be in place for this to occur. Servant leaders do not shift all responsibility to teachers and will take part in decision-making processes, and they can still voice disagreements, but they view one of their primary roles as supporting teachers to be able to do the work they need to do. This is achieved by empowering teams of teachers to respond to their context and their students.

In taking a holistic approach, servant leaders understand that social and emotional factors are inherent among any teaching staff. The servant leader's objective is to increase teamwork and personal agency over the improvement initiatives. This type of leader endeavors to create a participative

environment, empowering teachers by sharing decision-making and distributing leadership. A servant leader is not ruler of the team but someone who is adept at encouraging, enabling, and energizing people to jell as a team and realize their full potential (www.scrum.org). By focusing on the needs of team members and those they serve, servant leaders support their teaching workforce to achieve results in line with the school's strategic intent. A servant leader will influence behaviors by modeling collaboration, trust, empathy, and ethical use of power.

Servant leadership is integral to adaptability and continuous improvement. To consider your current capabilities in this area, examine your current practices against the following characteristics.

## Key Characteristics of Servant Leaders

- Focus on building a foundation of trust and psychological safety
- Stimulate group and individual empowerment and transparency
- Encourage and resource collaborative structures
- Convey empathy and listen deeply
- Display humility and situational awareness

## Applying Instructional Leadership Approaches

Instructional leaders are involved in classroom observations, review and interpret assessment information with staff, have a clear mission about learning gains, communicate high expectations about achievement, and attend to opportunities to learn and ensure that the school environment is conducive to learning. Because they have a more direct involvement in teacher professional learning, they can nurture and embed

learning processes that develop teachers' capabilities focused on improvement in teaching practice. Instructional leaders are curious about and deeply engaged in dialogue about what effective teaching and learning practices look like in their schools.

Robinson (2010) argued that the highest impact of school leaders was related to their promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. High-impact behaviors include planning, coordinating, evaluating teaching and the curriculum, establishing goals and expectations, strategic resourcing, **collective efficacy** about impact, and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

An instructional leader has a relentless focus on teaching and learning. This type of leader works to establish a high degree of consistency by planning, implementing, and establishing clear descriptions of practice. The clear descriptions of practice are focused on high-probability strategies that have the potential to significantly influence student learning. Instructional leaders articulate these practices as an **expertise pathway** where teachers at varying levels of experience can establish what is an appropriate next level of work.

Let's take, for example, a teacher who works at a school with a focus on classroom discourse. According to research, classroom discourse has the potential to considerably accelerate student learning, with a reported effect size of 0.82 (Hattie, 2009). This is well above the average effect size of 0.4. In other words, classroom discourse is a high-probability strategy that is worth pursuing. However, a focus on promoting discussion and dialogue in the classroom is still too broad a definition for an improvement effort – for example, an appropriate next level of work for a teacher whose classroom is worksheet-driven with little dialogue will be completely different from an appropriate next level of work for a teacher who

has embedded Socratic questioning techniques. This is not about judging a teacher's practice as effective or ineffective; it is about supporting teachers to conceptualize a pathway they can work through as they develop their expertise within an area. (For in-depth descriptions of how instructional leaders can co-construct expertise pathways, see Chapter 3.)

Hattie and Smith (2020) outlined the major ways instructional leaders think and act. They argued that the most effective instructional school leaders think in ways quite different from leaders who have the least impact and influence.

## Key Characteristics of Instructional Leaders

- Understand the need to focus on learning and the impact of teaching
- Believe their fundamental task is to evaluate the effect of everyone in their school on student learning
- Interpret successes and failures in student learning as directly related to what teachers and leaders did or didn't do
- See themselves as change agents
- Approach assessment as feedback about their impact
- Understand the importance of dialogue and of listening to student and teacher voices
- Set challenging targets for themselves and for teachers, to maximize student outcomes
- Welcome errors and share learning from their own missteps
- Create safe and high-trust environments in which teachers and students can learn from errors without losing face

(Hattie, 2015)



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How adaptive is your school context?
- How do you currently position your school-improvement work – is it more about implementation with fidelity or implementation as learning? Is the focus on technical problems or adaptive challenges?
- What do you believe it would take to lead sustained teacher learning in your unique context?
- What type of school leader do you feel you are most of the time: instructional, servant, or adaptive? Do you consciously move between leadership styles depending on what is required?

---

*Developing Teaching Expertise: A Guide to Adaptive Professional Learning Design*  
by Ryan Dunn and John Hattie. Copyright © 2022 by Corwin Press, Inc. All rights reserved.