

1



The Right Team

Most schools already have a team designated as the Leadership Team. At the secondary level this typically consists of the department chairs, and for elementary, grade-level chairs/leads. Selection of members varies by school—perhaps they are voted in by peers; perhaps responsibility rotates annually from one team member to another.

Knowing this, it makes sense to carefully consider the makeup of the team that will begin to share leadership with you to begin moving the school—or accelerate the progress—toward becoming a professional learning community. This group will become key in all improvement efforts. It is all-important to create a team that is open and ready to make this role shift, with members willing to de-privatize their own practice, while stepping up to lead peers in work that will do likewise. One of my colleagues who had been a high school principal for 20 years was fond of saying, “In schools, all the decisions are made for the comfort and convenience of the adults.” The teachers you select should be those who already put student needs ahead of their own and their colleagues’ comfort and convenience.

This is not a group of “yes-men” or “yes-women,” but choosing difficult personalities or those who perpetually play devil’s advocate will derail the shared leadership train before it departs. Someone who is occasionally skeptical, helping the team see all sides of a decision, can be a good addition. A perpetual blocker is not.

In some schools, the current, standing leadership team may not be the right group for this new role. Although some principals might feel that it is politically difficult to select a new team specifically for this purpose, it is important to weigh pros and cons before simply deciding to keep the status quo. In schools I have supported, the most successful teams—whose schools progress farther in less time—are new teams formed specifically for the work of leading their schools on the journey toward becoming a professional learning community (PLC). Typically, new teams include

some teachers who are also part of the standing leadership team and others who are new members.

Consider the larger picture: Every teacher in the school is—or will be—part of a collaborative team, with each team led by a teacher leader who is part of the new group you are creating to share leadership with you. For elementary schools, each grade level becomes a collaborative team. For secondary, the teachers who teach each major *course*—U.S. history, biology, seventh-grade English—will be a team. A discussion of assigning teachers who have multiple preps will be covered in Team Assignments and Leader Selection. A comprehensive high school may have between 20 and 25 collaborative teams.

If you select a new team, it is advisable to call it by a new name to distinguish it from the traditional leadership team that will remain in place. The new group might be called the Guiding Coalition, or the Steering Committee.

Some principals have felt it advisable to leave the term *professional learning community* or *PLC* out of the new team's title. New terms become buzzwords, and buzzwords and acronyms notoriously take on various meanings and interpretations to different constituents, and these have suffered that fate as well.

The standing leadership team will continue to function, overall, in its traditional role. In some districts, such as the Beaumont Unified School District in Beaumont, California, new school teams formed for this work were named the Instructional Leadership Council, or ILC. The traditional elementary grade-level chairs (GLCs) continued in many of their former functions, in some cases sharing responsibilities with ILC members at their grade levels. Secondary department chairs in Beaumont also continued to function in a traditional fashion, with some also becoming ILC members.

Members of your new team *must* be highly respected by colleagues. Because they need to have attained credibility with peers, they should not be the newest, least experienced teachers, even though such teachers often have very positive attitudes and openness to new challenges. Those chosen should be strong, effective teachers, but it is especially important for them to possess an attitude of openness to their own continuous improvement and to the role of leading colleagues in new ways.

For purposes of this book, I use the term *guiding coalition* or *GC*. Each GC member will facilitate specific kinds of work with his or her collaborative team.

As mentioned, a teacher could be *both* a GC member and a department chair/grade-level chair. *Over time*, since traditional leadership team members are typically voted in or otherwise selected for one to two years, it may be desirable for the criteria for being on the leadership team to eventually be modified (if possible) to include being a GC member, thus streamlining the functioning of the two groups and eliminating the need for separate meetings.

Since many secondary teachers have multiple preps, I recommend prioritizing team participation—*before* determining GC leadership—according to the highest-leverage courses these teachers teach (see Team Assignments and Leader Selection). As collaboration becomes more sophisticated, strategies can be developed to publish the work of each course-alike team with all teachers who may teach one or more sections of that course, but who are assigned to other teams.

For singletons, such as a band teacher, a full-time ceramics teacher, and other such specialized teachers, an interdisciplinary “specialists’ team” or “enhancement subjects team” can be formed. It is absolutely essential that every teacher on staff is part of a team. One mistake secondary principals sometimes make is to excuse these teachers—or other noncore teachers, such as PE teachers—from team membership. The result is a badly mixed message, symbolically undercutting the importance of team collaboration and undermining their own statements of the value of forming a cohesive, school-wide learning community. Other configurations for specialists are possible, including teams that collaborate electronically or whose members—from various schools—meet in a central location. These configurations have issues of their own, however, and having all teams from a school collaborating with others *at* their own school lends strength to the model of the school as a PLC. More on teams of single-subject specialists in Chapters 5, 9, and 10.

As mentioned, a comprehensive high school could have between 20 and 25 collaborative teams, each with its own teacher leader, while in very small elementary schools, where there may be only one or one-and-a-half classes (combinations) at each grade level, teams may be vertical combinations, such as K–1, 2–3, and 4–6.

Some specialists—such as special education teachers—are often best assigned to a specific grade level in elementary schools, and a specific course-alike team at the secondary level. They bring extensive expertise to the teams they join, and if they belong to a team where many of their students are enrolled (as Resource Specialist Program [RSP] students) or mainstreamed (from a Special Day Class [SDC]), they are an important voice in the team’s planning. Even if few or no students from an SDC are currently mainstreamed, it is valuable for the SDC teacher to interact with other teachers who share the content he or she is providing—with appropriate accommodations and modifications—for his or her own students.

Course-alike, vertical, and interdisciplinary teams all have specific advantages when used for various purposes. Based on the size of the school, having as many teachers as possible on course-alike teams forms a solid foundation for teamwork. Then, other configurations can be used strategically, for specific purposes, once teaming is established.

The chapter on goal setting with SMARTe goals will further explore what it takes to make a group of teachers a *team*.

To guide your thinking process for team selection, see the Confidential Principal Tool for Selection of Guiding Coalition.

TEAM ASSIGNMENTS AND LEADER SELECTION ■

Recommended Prioritizing Strategy for Collaborative Team Participation (prior to GC selection) at the Secondary Level

Step 1—Assign English and mathematics teachers to one team each

1a—Eliminate any other subjects from these teachers’ potential team lists, even if they have more preps of the other courses

1b—High school—ninth grade has top priority; other grade levels in descending order (e.g., a teacher teaching ninth and tenth will be assigned to the ninth-grade team) (Algebra takes precedence over Geometry, and so on)

1b—Middle school—assign by greatest number of preps, but ensuring that each team has sufficient membership to make a team

Step 2—Assign science and social studies teachers to one team each

2a—Eliminate any other subjects from these teachers' potential team lists, even if they have more preps of the other courses

2b—High school—ninth-grade courses have top priority; other grade levels in descending order—see Step 1

2b—Middle school—assign by greatest number of preps, but ensure that each team has sufficient membership to make a team

Step 3—Assign all teachers who teach NO sections of core subjects

3a—Use grade levels first, if the overall subject group is large (e.g., ninth-grade PE)

3b—Consider groupings such as performing arts, fine arts, or career tech if there are sufficient members to create more job-alike teams

For very small secondary schools, create English and mathematics teams first, then science and social studies, then all others. This is a similar structure to vertical teams at very small elementary schools.

Obviously this prioritizing strategy will vary by school, numbers of teachers in potential teams, and individual principal judgment—including judgments about individual teachers' personalities and interactions with specific peers, although this should *not* be the first pass deciding factor.

English and mathematics courses are key to student success in all other subjects, and thus receive first priority for any teacher who teaches even one section. For high school, further rationale for this method lies in the fact that ninth graders are most at risk of school failure, with older students less at risk, overall, as they age. So in assigning teachers to collaborative teams that will interactively plan for student success, it is important to prioritize team assignments that serve younger students first.

Note: The Essential Program Components (EPCs) of the Academic Program Survey (APS) in California (Department of Education, 2013) are a research-based set of recommendations that are applied to schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress for Title I. Applying the priorities discussed above to the allocation of resources—in this case, teacher expertise—have enabled schools that apply them faithfully to make significant improvement in student outcomes.

Confidential Principal Tool for Selection of Guiding Coalition

*Important Note: Complete all staff team assignments **first**—see previous section.*

There is no answer key or recommended total score for these ratings. This tool is to help create a profile of each teacher under consideration as a GC member. Ideally, you want team members with 4s and 5s. Remember that this team will have to work *together* as a team, in addition to each leading their own teams, so consider the group dynamics of the GC you are building. See sample teacher P. Smith.

(This form should be duplicated for secondary use, because multiple candidates may need to be considered to select the optimum leader for each team. Elementary principals will consider candidates for selecting one GC leader for each team, preK or kindergarten through sixth grade.)

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SUMMARY ■

Choosing the right team is foundational to the success of beginning shared leadership. In most cases, the standing leadership team is not the right team for this purpose. After considering adjustments that may be needed in the makeup of teams school-wide—specifically for secondary—use the suggested tool to select the optimum candidates for team leadership. These teacher leaders will become your guiding coalition.

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2



Creating the Calendar and Reflecting on Readiness

Taking the time to prepare thoroughly for the first meeting of your guiding coalition will pay off with each subsequent meeting.

CREATING THE CALENDAR ■

When is the best time of year to begin this work? The best time is now. Waiting until September has no advantages, other than the fact that it *feels* like a new beginning. There can actually be good reasons not to start in September, including a plethora of other new district or site initiatives, typically rolled out with a new school year. In my many years of working with school teams, I have seen that one of the most practical, helpful aspects of becoming a professional learning community (PLC) is that it brings all the curricular, instructional, and assessment initiatives into a coherent model, including new ones as they come down the pike. Thus, any time can be optimal for beginning the work.

As more schools nationwide join the PLC journey, it has become increasingly common for teacher contracts to prescribe regularly scheduled time for collaboration during the work day. This is absolutely essential. Without time for regular collaboration carved out of the contract day, a PLC is, at

best, a part-time, half-hearted endeavor that will produce similar results—along with a lot of teacher frustration, especially on the part of teacher leaders. Uninterrupted, diligently protected time for collaboration of at least 45 to 60 minutes per week is a good start. Some secondary schools now have master schedules with daily common prep periods for teachers by teams. Thus, these teachers have the potential for collaborating several times weekly. A fascinating phenomenon of teacher collaboration is that although some may resist in the beginning, the more they collaborate (and improve their collaborative skills) the more they like it. In the long run, collaboration reduces teacher isolation, spreads the workload, and saves individual teacher preparation time. Most important, everyone's students become more successful—the very purpose of collaborating.

Ironically, the juncture of excitement over winning time for collaboration during the school day is the very point at which the journey often falters. Negotiating collaboration time as a contractual feature is sometimes a long, even arduous process. But once this is accomplished, there is a sadly mistaken assumption that nothing more needs to be done. *The missed point is that it is equally critical for the teacher leaders—your guiding coalition (GC)—to have regular, protected time to work and learn together as a team.* It is impossible to overstate this. This is a widely ignored necessity and slows the development of many schools on their journeys. This is where leadership skills are proactively taught, practiced, and discussed in an emotionally safe setting. This is where you, the principal, begin to symbolically and concretely share decision making. This is where you learn what is working and what is floundering—across the whole school—in one setting. This is where, with the help of the teacher leaders, you develop and coalesce your own thinking—and statements you will make to the staff as a whole—about what you will be tight on and what you will be loose on. It is time that is absolutely critical to the development of this team and its members, including yourself as the leader of the leaders. Think of the oxygen mask speech during takeoff on a commercial airline: put your own mask on first, then help others who may need assistance. This regular, protected time is when the GC recharges itself so that its members can go forth and provide leadership to their colleagues.

How much time do you need for this purpose, and how often? Weekly is ideal; monthly is probably the minimum for progress to be made. An hour to 90 minutes weekly will accomplish a great deal; a half-day monthly would probably work. The same kinds of strategies used to carve out time for teacher collaboration can also be applied to find time for the GC to work together. Remember that GC time *does not replace* team collaboration—it is, essentially, preparation for it. In my experience, among the easiest ways of finding GC time is to pay teachers for the additional hourly time before or after school, or to build a common prep period into the master schedule where all GC members are available at the same time during the school day.

I worked with one high school principal who lamented, "I have no time for this [GC] team to get together, and it's killing us!"

I asked, "Could you pay them?" She stopped in her tracks and shook her head as if to shake out the cobwebs.

"That was too simple. That's a 'duh.'" And that is what she did.

So the first step is to create the calendar. The calendar needs to include the regular teacher collaboration dates and times each month (ideally, once

a week) AND the GC meetings that will support that work. Once your GC is identified, they will help you refine the calendar—a symbolic beginning of shared leadership.

What is the agenda for these GC meetings? That is the content of this book. Each chapter focuses on one GC meeting's content, designed to support the teacher leaders as they lead their upcoming team meetings. The GC meeting for that content could be one session, or multiple sessions that span a number of collaborative meetings that your teacher leaders will lead. Both the time frames and sequence suggested in this book are flexible and should be adapted to your own context, but they are based on the work of real teams, at all levels, observed and analyzed for over 15 years.

I hasten to add that there is no ideal or perfect sequence of developmental activities for these GC sessions. In my work, I create customized sessions for each cohort of teams, based on their levels of understanding and real application of the processes. Countless school principals in areas where the PLC concept has become popular have proudly informed me, "We've been doin' PLCs for ___ years!" A short conversation may reveal that their school has been doing what has been termed "PLC Lite"—teachers meet at least occasionally in what are referred to as "teams," but what goes on during those meetings has little coherence. Also, the school's Pyramid Response to Intervention may be so ill-defined that many students are falling through the cracks. Conversations with teachers are the most telling—do they see their work as being all about learning or all about teaching? In my view, when every teacher finishes the classic mission statement starter-sentence, "We believe all students can learn . . ." with the statement, "and no student will fail on my watch," the school is most likely operating as a PLC.

The chapters that follow present a loosely structured set of professional learning sessions distilled from many years' work with teams—all designed to develop strong shared leadership between principals and teacher leaders. Use the suggestions as a customizable, flexible set of strategies that can be used in longer or shorter sessions to help your teacher leaders prepare to lead their colleagues in this exciting and critical work, enabling *all* students to achieve at the highest levels.

CAUTIONARY NOTES: WHAT IS YOUR LEVEL OF READINESS? ■

It is not too soon to discuss a few challenges that individual principals may face in sharing leadership. I believe any principal can learn to share leadership effectively, although some clearly find it difficult. I have seen that most aspects of leadership are learnable and all leadership can be constantly improved.

Opposite extremes can and do emerge when principals interact with teams of teacher leaders, even when one of the stated purposes of their work is developing shared leadership. At one end of the spectrum are extreme controllers. No meaningful work is accomplished, because the principal cannot relinquish control. One principal I observed simply never allowed the team's discussions to enter the realm of school-wide

policies, practices, and procedures, and only at a very surface level addressed issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Whenever a teacher tried to bring up something in an area of larger concern, he simply made a dismissive comment and moved the discussion back to something smaller and less significant. The teachers soon learned to keep quiet and let the principal do most of the talking—they knew their role was to agree with him.

Another principal set about working with her leadership team on a set of expectations for upcoming tasks for teacher collaborations. Historically, teams had been free to meet if they wanted, but there were no clear expectations about what to do if they did meet; or they could decide to use the time for individual teacher prep—as most did. After the work for the upcoming collaborations was rolled out to the staff, a couple of teachers went to her and complained. She reversed the team's decisions and allowed the time to revert to being used for whatever teachers wanted. It was obvious that she never regained credibility with her team.

Still another principal allowed her team to help design professional learning about PLC processes for the rest of the staff, but insisted on doing it all herself. When I privately suggested having a few of her teacher leaders co-present with her, which would have entailed helping them prepare their presentations, she balked and said, "They would never do it as well as I can." While I never saw her presentations, I was struck by the missed opportunity to create staff ownership of the initiatives. Even if the teacher leaders' segments were less than perfect, allowing and supporting their presentations would have made a huge symbolic statement of shared ownership—and most likely would have been the beginnings of increased ownership by the rest of the staff, whom the principal often complained were "very resistant."

One of the most extreme examples I have observed at the opposite end of the spectrum—abdication of leadership—also happened in a setting where the principal was interacting with the team as a whole. They had reached an important decision point, and there was dissention among the team members about how to resolve it. All the team was looking to the principal for guidance. At that point, she pulled away from the table and began texting on her BlackBerry. In amazement, I made my way over to her and asked in a whisper why she had left the group at this particular point. She said, "I want them to figure this out." It was a sadly misguided decision on her part. She let them continue to argue, and no decision was made. The team left that day in confusion about their work and their roles.

In another case, a first-year high school principal was named to a school whose leadership team was already attending bimonthly workshops to deepen their understanding and solidify their work in developing the school as a PLC. Deciding he had too many things to do as a new principal, he assigned the development of this team to one of the assistant principals (APs). The team, disheartened by the symbolic degrading of their work and believing that without the principal's firsthand involvement "this isn't going anywhere," their participation became politely superficial.

Both control and abdication are obviously wrong applications of the practice of shared leadership. Some principals seem to possess innate characteristics that make shared leadership a natural practice or next step for them, but I believe that self-awareness and conscious practice can improve these characteristics in any principal.

Principal Self-Assessment for Shared Leadership Readiness

This is not a complete list, but here are some key traits for principals that make shared leadership easy—or, in absentia, more difficult. How self-aware are you? Rate yourself from 1 to 5 on these, just as you rated your potential GC members on the GC selection criteria:

Openness—Like the GC members I hope to choose, I remain open. As the leader, I do not possess all the answers. My teachers know more than I do about their content, and in many cases, about instructional practices that will best support their students in learning it. I have the bird’s-eye-view of the school from my vantage point as principal, which they do not, but they have the detail about what is going on “on the ground.” I do not have to have the final say on everything we should do to improve our school.

My self-rating: ____

Humility—I am learning, side-by-side, with my team. My positional authority does not allow me to send them off to learn without me. Although I am their boss, I do not behave in ways that show arrogance.

My self-rating: ____

Courage—I have overcome my fear that my teacher leaders won’t do something exactly right. I allow them to make mistakes—always stepping in quickly with coaching questions to minimize any possible detriment to student learning.

My self-rating: ____

Empowerment—I do everything possible to develop teacher leaders whose leadership in certain areas could outshine my own. They might become (or are already) better presenters, facilitators, or askers of better guiding questions. In the meantime, they might not facilitate a process or present something as expertly as I can (or so I might think), but I am OK with that and affirm them for their work. I know when—and how—to give feedback that will help them grow, yet I am careful not to over-critique and make them fear they have to be perfect while they are learning.

My self-rating: ____

Judgment—I have the wisdom to know what I SHOULD be tight on. I know I cannot abdicate my role as the leader of the school, and the leader of the teacher leaders.

My self-rating: ____

Honesty—I never pretend to share decision making with my team when I have actually already made the decision or plan to make it. I know that nothing will erode my credibility—or this work—faster with my teacher leaders.

My self-rating: ____

Ideals and beliefs—I am tight on my beliefs about all students’ ability to learn at the highest levels. I model respect for staff members even as I do not allow them or us to blame the students or parents for poor results.

My self-rating: ____

Self-reflection: Which of these do I need to spend more time reflecting on and improving my personal practice to share leadership effectively?

What Does Shared Leadership Sound Like?

The idea of sharing leadership can be new—almost foreign—for some principals. In some cases, it helps to be able to begin to picture what it looks and sounds like before jumping in. Below are some sample statements that I have heard effective leaders make as they begin to move to a new style of sharing leadership:

FLEXIBILITY:

Right now, my thinking on this is _____. But my thinking could be changed. I'd like to hear from all of you.

SOLICITING INPUT FROM TEACHER EXPERTS:

As we look at our school data from the _____ assessment, I have some questions about the math data. _____, as a math person, what are your thoughts about the differences in the results for _____ students and for _____ students?

CLARITY:

We need to make a decision about _____. The only parameters I have for this decision are _____ and _____. Beyond that, we will make the decision as a team. Then I will inform the staff in the weekly bulletin, and then each of you can follow up with your own teams.

I have to make the decision about _____, and I will share my thinking with you about it. I am interested in your input, but I will be making the final decision.

EQUITY:

We haven't heard from _____ or _____ yet. Everyone's voice is important here, and everyone needs to weigh in on this.

What are some kinds of similar statements and/or questions you might begin to use as you begin to work with your GC in a new structure of shared leadership?

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SUMMARY

It is impossible to overstate the importance of carving out structured time at regular intervals to meet with your guiding coalition; it is every bit as important as having time during the contract day for teacher teams to collaborate. Second, sharing leadership is a major departure from the way many principals lead, so I strongly urge you to take time to reflect on the self-assessment questions to ensure that you are ready to begin developing yourself—and your teacher leaders—to work together in new ways.

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