

Features

Building a Professional Learning Community

For system leaders, it means allowing autonomy within defined parameters

By Richard DuFour

To be a school superintendent in the United States today is to feel the pull of conflicting demands and competing ideologies. The demands of different interest groups are often readily apparent—for example, parents who want smaller class sizes versus taxpayers who want cuts in the budget.

Perhaps less obvious to those who never have served as a superintendent are the conflicting images of the very nature of the position. Should the superintendent be the forceful leader who implements his or her personal vision of how a school district and its individual schools should operate, or should the contemporary superintendent embrace site-based management and encourage the staff of each school to identify and pursue the issues most relevant to them? Should the desire for equity and equal opportunity lead superintendents to champion uniformity and consistency throughout the district, or should the realization that change occurs one school at a time lead superintendents to support the freedom and autonomy at each school that inevitably lead to differences between sites?

Superintendents err when they resolve this apparent dichotomy by choosing one approach or the other. In their landmark study of organizations that sustained excellence over an extended period of time, James Collins and Jerry Porras, co-authors of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, found those organizations embraced the paradox of living with two seemingly contradictory ideas or forces at the same time. They rejected the "Tyranny of the Or" and embraced the "Genius of the And." Instead of choosing between A or B, these companies figured out a way to have both A and B. For example, they developed powerful philosophical and conceptual images that drove the entire organization and that encouraged the individuals within the organization to seek and develop innovative strategies for achieving the core purpose of the organization.

Collins and Porras wrote: "We are not talking about balance here. Balance implies going to the midpoint, 50-50, half and half. ... [A] highly visionary company doesn't want to blend ying and yang into a gray, indistinguishable circle that is neither highly ying nor highly yang; it aims to be distinctly ying and distinctly yang, both at the same time, all the time."

Superintendents who reject the "Tyranny of the Or" and embrace the "Genius of the And" are skillful in demonstrating "loose-tight leadership" or "directed autonomy." They focus on identifying and articulating both the fundamental purpose of the organization and a few "big ideas" that will help the district improve in its capacity to achieve that purpose. They are tight on purpose and big ideas—insisting that those within the organization act in ways consistent with those concepts and demanding that the district align all of its practices and programs with them.

At the same time, however, they encourage individual and organizational autonomy in the day-to-day operations of the various schools and departments. This autonomy is not characterized by random acts of innovation, but rather is guided by carefully defined parameters that give focus and direction to schools and those within them.

I am convinced that the parameters—the focused purpose and big ideas—that should drive school districts today are found in the concept of the professional learning community.

I have worked with school districts throughout North America and witnessed the different approaches superintendents have taken to implement the concepts of the learning community model in their districts. Some have invited schools to consider the learning community model as a strategy for stimulating improvement. Others have proclaimed that all schools must become learning communities, then left the details as to how to bring about this transformation to each school to resolve. Still others have been more prescriptive about the precise policies, programs and procedures each school must adopt to develop as a learning organization.

The strategy proven most effective, however, is one that is loose and tight, a strategy that establishes a clear priority and discernible parameters and then provides each school and department with the autonomy to chart its own course for achieving the objectives.

Shared Knowledge

The efforts of a superintendent of a suburban school district offer an excellent example of leading the professional learning community initiative on a districtwide basis. She began by building shared knowledge about professional learning communities with her leadership team—central-office staff, principals and leaders of the teachers' union. She distributed articles and made the content of those articles the focus of monthly team meetings.

In addition, she presented a book on learning communities to every member of the team, raised questions based on the book and solicited reactions to the concepts it presented. She required all members of the leadership team to attend a two-day workshop on professional learning communities to ensure her entire team heard a consistent message and developed a common vocabulary. She demonstrated the importance she placed on the workshop by attending every minute of it herself. Soon thereafter she held a follow-up meeting of the team where she asked if the professional learning community model offered a preferred alternative to the current reality of the district's operations.

Although this superintendent was a proponent of collaborative decision making, she recognized the importance of building shared knowledge as a prerequisite for the decision-making process. She understood that as a leader she was called on not merely to pool opinions, but rather to ensure that each member of the group had sufficient knowledge to make good decisions. Thus she ensured that members of her team were able to draw upon consistent information, operate from the same conceptual framework and use a common vocabulary when called upon to assess the potential of the professional learning community model. She attended to a critical component of the process—building shared knowledge.

Constructing Consensus

While most superintendents acknowledge the benefits of building consensus, they often operate under the assumption that the group does not achieve consensus until each member has endorsed the proposal under consideration.

This superintendent understood the difference between "consensus" and "unanimity." If everyone must agree before the group can take action, it is unlikely that action will ever occur. Therefore, she had established an operational definition for consensus that was understood by every member of the team.

This definition included two important criteria: 1) all points of view have been heard and 2) the will of the group is evident, even to those who most oppose it. Once those criteria were met, the superintendent declared the team had arrived at consensus and made it clear she expected the full cooperation of each member of the team in implementing the professional learning community model throughout the district.

She then arranged for a series of meetings with members of the team to articulate her expectations and to clarify priorities. She used a small-group format for these meetings to encourage dialogue and questions. At each meeting she explained that she intended to be tight on the following concepts.

** A focus on learning.*

The superintendent reviewed the district mission statement and its pledge to ensure high levels of learning for all students. She contended that if the school district was to fulfill that pledge, administrators and teachers at all levels had to focus their energies on three critical questions: what is it we want all students to learn, how will we know when they have learned it, and how will we respond when a student is not learning?

She called on every school to monitor the learning of each student on a timely basis and to develop systematic procedures to give additional time and support—during the school day—to any student who was experiencing difficulty. The particulars of each school's plan could vary, but every school was called on to create a system of interventions that ensured students received additional time and support.

** Collaborative teams.*

The superintendent called upon each school to organize the professional staff into collaborative teams. The structure of the teams was left to each school's discretion—course specific, grade level, interdisciplinary, vertical or departmental. Although the superintendent insisted that teams be provided time to meet during the school day, each school was free to create its own strategy for providing this time.

The superintendent, however, was adamant about two points: every professional staff member would be a member of a team, and the focus of the team would be student learning. To ensure this focus on learning, she insisted that every team identify and pursue a specific, measurable goal that, if achieved, would result in demonstrably higher levels of student learning.

** Teacher teams focused on results.*

The superintendent recognized most districts address the three critical questions at the central-office level. Directors of curriculum develop district curriculum guides. Directors of assessment monitor results on district and state assessments. The central office directs school improvement committees that must develop strategies for raising student performance.

However, she also recognized that all this activity at the central-office level often had little impact on the day-to-day workings of classroom teachers. She made it clear she wanted to engage, not just central-office staff, but each teacher team in every school in the investigation of the critical questions. She proposed a four-part process to promote that team engagement.

Periodic Reviews

The superintendent then explained she would meet individually with every member of the leadership team over the next several months to review the following areas:

* **Planning:** What is your plan for implementing the professional learning community process in your school or department? What specific steps do you plan to take and when will you take them? What are you doing to align the practices and processes of your school with these concepts?

* **Monitoring:** What are your strategies for monitoring each student's mastery of essential learning? How are you monitoring the productivity of your teams? How will you assess the results of this initiative in your school or department?

* **Modeling:** How are you modeling a focus on student learning and your commitment to collaboration? What have you done to create a guiding coalition to assist you in this important endeavor in your school or department?

* **Driving questions:** What questions have you posed to guide the work of the teams and the progress of the initiative?

* **Allocating time:** How have you ensured that every student who experiences initial difficulty is provided additional time and support for learning during the school day? What steps have you taken to give every collaborative team time to work together during the school day?

* **Celebrating:** What are you doing to celebrate the work of teams and the progress of your school in order to sustain this initiative?

* **Confronting:** What resistance and obstacles have you encountered and how have you responded?

The superintendent concluded by sharing the assumptions that she hoped would drive the work of the leadership team:

1. The fundamental purpose of the district was to ensure high levels of learning for every student.
2. This important purpose could not be achieved if people throughout the organization worked in isolation. Coordination and collaboration were essential.
3. By working together to build the capacity of the district to function as a professional learning community, all staff would experience both greater job satisfaction and the sense of accomplishment that comes with making a positive difference in the lives of the students.
4. The advancement of the professional learning community concept would be the top priority of the district, and each member of the leadership team would be called upon to present tangible evidence of his or her contribution to the effort.

A Collective Effort

The leadership of this superintendent has not eliminated obstacles and problems as the district moves forward with the professional learning community initiative. Obstacles and problems are an inevitable byproduct of the change process. But her efforts to build shared knowledge and to arrive at consensus have created a guiding coalition for the initiative.

In addition, she has delineated both the broad parameters to guide the work of schools and the specific areas in which the staff in those schools have the freedom to find the best strategies for achieving the district's goals. She has embraced the "Genius of the And" and given the people in her district rare gifts—a clear sense of organizational direction and a better understanding of how each person can contribute to the collective effort to make a difference in the lives of students.

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