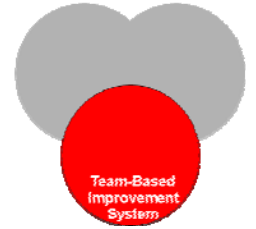

Base Camp Pre-work: Article #2 – Team-based Improvement



“Team-based School Improvement: The Leader’s Role.” *Issue Brief*. Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), 6:2, February 2008.

The pre-work items for Base Camp and Leadership Summit have been carefully selected to enhance the understanding and interaction of your District Change Team, both while at Base Camp and Summit (in evening discussions) and in ongoing study (follow-up sessions, study groups, etc.).

Your IIC will organize opportunities for your District Change Team to make full use of these resources.

Conclusion

Author Sally Zepeda (2004) notes, "Leaders build authentic relationships with teachers, students, staff, and other stakeholders, and effective leaders work to promote an environment that supports...interaction and participation... interdependence...shared interests and beliefs...concern for individual and minority views...meaningful relationships." Clearly, the leader's role in planning for and supporting team-based school improvement is crucial. With effective leadership, the talents and unique value of teachers, students, staff, and a critical mass of key stakeholders will make school improvement less like the movie Groundhog Day and more like reality. ■

Dr. Gale Hulme is a freelance writer on educational issues and serves as executive director of programs and systemic initiatives at Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement.



Issue Brief

Professional Association of Georgia Educators
Vol. 6 No. 2
February 2008

Team-Based School Improvement: The Leader's Role

This Issue Brief is the second in a four-part series on team-based improvement as a fundamental strategy for improving schools. While the first Issue Brief (November 2007, Vol. 6, No.1) emphasized the "big picture" of what team leaders must know and be able to do to lead teams, this issue guides the leader to prepare for the success of team-based improvement. Upcoming Issue Briefs three and four guide readers through the team-based improvement process for high performing, learning-focused teams, and include descriptions of sample tools and tips for teams and their leaders to utilize in creating and sustaining school improvement for student success and organizational effectiveness.

Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

Goldsmith, M. (January 2008). "How Can I Improve Collaboration Within My Team?" *Harvard Management Update*, 13:1, 12.

Gratton, L., and Erickson, T. J. (November 2007). "Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams," *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved on January 19, 2008 at www.hbr.org (Type in R0711F in the Search box on the left).

Jolly, A. (January 13, 2008). *The Jolly Learning Spot*. Anne's blog. Retrieved on January 20, 2008 at <http://www.jollylearningspot.blogspot.com/>

Meehan, P., Rigby, D, and Rogers, P. (January 2008). "Creating and Sustaining a Winning Culture," *Harvard Management Update*, 13:1, 9-11.

Page, D., et al. (2007). *Base Camp Curriculum: Organizing for Improvement*. Atlanta: Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement. (See www.galeaders.org under Rising Stars, Forms, for the 8 Roles of School Leaders™ and the 8 Roles of School Leaders Self-Assessment Instrument which can be downloaded at no cost by any Georgia educator.)

Zepeda, S. J. (2004). *Instructional Leadership for School Improvement*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

PAGE Issue Briefs are available online at www.pageinc.org

Providing professional learning to enhance competence and confidence, build leadership and increase student achievement.

**Professional Association of Georgia Educators
P.O. Box 942270**

**Atlanta, GA 31141-2270
770-216-8555 (Metro-Atlanta) or 800-334-6861 (Outside Atlanta)
www.pageinc.org**

Former Alabama Teacher of the Year (1994) Anne Jolly reflects on the business-as-usual cycle of school improvement in too many schools:

Did you ever see the movie, Groundhog Day? You may remember it – an early 90's film. Every morning the curmudgeonly hero (Bill Murray) kept waking up in the same day. And he had to keep reliving that same day over and over because he never got it right. Sometimes I think we're trapped in that movie as educators...Our schools operate the way they've operated for decades. For the most part, teachers still operate as isolated instructors with little or no time for professional growth built into the school day. When teachers do meet in teams for professional learning, it's often something that's added to their current, overflowing list of responsibilities – many of which don't directly relate to teaching and learning (Jolly, January 18, 2008).

Team-based improvement breaks the predictable cycle. Most

professionals buy-in to the concept of team-based improvement. The idea that tackling complex school improvement issues requires collective thinking, including all team members and a critical mass of stakeholders, simply makes sense. Why, then, isn't common sense common practice? Why do too many teams begin with a bang and end in a whimper? As educators, how can we get it right?

Clarifying the Need

While the first (November 2007, Vol. 6, No. 1) in this four-part series provides the "big picture" of what the leader needs to know and be able to do to lead and sustain team-based improvement, this second installment focuses on a step-by-step process (Page, et al., 2007) for the successful planning of team-based improvement by leaders. This investment of time and pre-meditation on the part of leaders will pay dividends in student achievement results and sustainability of teamwork.

The answer is simple – effective leadership. Implementation of team-based improvement, however, is more difficult. It requires leaders with focus and discipline in order to create a systemic process for high performing teamwork that engages a critical mass of key stakeholders, results in school improvement, and becomes embedded in the school culture as "the way we do things around here" (Page et al., 2007). Leaders must provide focus and the

First, the leader must get clear on the desirability of improving the district and/or school culture through team-based improvement of results. What beliefs drive the leader to champion team-based improvement? Bain & Company's 2007 global survey of management tools and trends revealed that 91 percent of the 1,200 senior executives surveyed concurred that "culture is as important as strategy for business success." Further, 81 percent of the senior leaders in a related survey concurred that an organization that lacks a winning culture can be only mediocre at best. Meehan, Rigby and Rogers (January 2008) define a winning culture as having a unique brand based on shared values and heritage and cultural norms that translate that organizational unique brand into "customer-focused actions and bottom-line results."

In other words, you want the people who work in your district or school to take pride in the values and traditions that under gird the organization. As a leader, you want people to be sold on district and school goals, focused on what is best for students, parents and the community, and ready and willing to translate goals into action. Such employees, say the authors, "think and act like owners – they take personal responsibility for overall business performance." This transformation of culture happens over time when people are regularly included in the action through team-based approaches to solving challenging district or school problems. In winning teams, team-based approaches prevail.

Once the leader is clear on the need for team-based improvement, he or she needs to express those beliefs in a needs statement. Leaders also need to premeditate how to engage teams in clarifying the need. Executive Coach Marshall Goldsmith (January 2008) suggests engaging teams in assessing the current level and desired level of teamwork, identifying behaviors that would close the performance gap, engaging team members in interviewing each other about a change that each can make personally to help the team work more effectively, and following up on the process regularly for continuous improvement. Page et al. (2007) ask senior leaders to assess the current and desired state by creating visual and descriptive models of the "as is" and "to be" states of team-based improvement, sharing those with each other, then engaging their teams in doing the same, discussing the performance gap and deciding upon solutions to close the gap together.

Establishing Performance Measures

While the effective leader will want to engage the team in the analysis of a full range of data sources, the leader also must review multiple data sources and their implications for school improvement in advance of the team. Doing so provides insights

and a level of comfort in facilitating data analysis. Advance data analysis helps the leader set balanced performance measures (or targets) for school improvement around student achievement, organizational effectiveness (or organizational processes), team learning and growth, and student and stakeholder engagement.

While most will feel comfortable setting performance measures around student achievement, it is the leader's role to lead the way by considering all performance factors. The leader can discuss organizational factors that need attention (e.g., hiring, retention, routing buses, processing textbook orders, etc.). Leaders, who believe learning must be the focus in schools, help teams set improvement targets for the adults, as well as for the students. If team-based improvement is important, then leaders must also hold themselves and their teams accountable for engaging all key stakeholder groups in the process by establishing performance measures for student and stakeholder engagement. By establishing a balanced set of performance measures, the leader and teams are more likely to improve student learning and re-culture to embrace team-based improvement.

Setting Clear Expectations

The next step that focuses team behavior is to clearly communicate leader expectations for the implementation of team-based improvement. The leader must communicate a vision of the pervasive use of teaming throughout the district and/or schools as the way we do business. Drawing on the premeditation he or she has already completed, the leader can leave an indelible mark with audiences by expressing deeply held beliefs (e.g., "Based on a review of the data showing that 40 percent of staff eligible to retire exercises that option upon eligibility, teacher retention is a major challenge. Because I believe that people stay where they feel they can contribute, we need to develop team-based approaches that engage the unique value and expertise of each person to help us improve student achievement." The leader must share his or her future story, painting a picture of the organization's transformation from the current state to the desired state of team-based improvement for student learning; provide relevant research; and share performance measures.) While not every decision requires a team, the leader must communicate that, for decisions that lend themselves to collaboration, teaming is expected in order to tap into the talents of all staff and key stakeholder groups. Disciplined leaders take time to write out their charge to the teams, share this draft with a critical friend for feedback, and refine their comments before delivery. They then monitor, measure, and support teams in implementing the charge.

Identifying and Removing Barriers

A useful exercise for leaders is to carefully examine the "as is" and "to be" states of team-based improvement and to brainstorm barriers that may be getting in the way of closing the performance gap. Frequently, leaders engage a senior team or teams themselves in analyzing the gap and brainstorming the barriers. Once a list of barriers has been generated, it is the role of the leader to remove or find "work-arounds" that may impede team-based approaches. For example, time is a classic barrier. Rarely can a teacher, for example, create time during the school day. While the leader can brainstorm with the team for ideas of how to solve the time issue, only the leader can create time during the school day by shuffling the schedule, hiring substitutes, or marshalling volunteers, for example. Lack of resources presents another common barrier. Because staff members do not control budgets, for example, they will look to the leader to secure community contributions, in-kind donations and/or reallocate funding and personnel that align the allocation of resources to the achievement of the desired state. By removing obstacles to team success up front, the leader demonstrates her commitment or walks the talk in the eyes of team members.

Building Teams

While the initial Issue Brief in this series defined various types of teams, this and subsequent articles will focus on dynamic teams (ad hoc improvement teams) that arise and dissolve as needed to study problems, drive projects and design, develop and implement solutions to identified causes blocking school improvement. While team membership may be appointed or self-initiated, it is important to take a strengths-based approach, ensuring that all roles needed are fulfilled by someone on the team. Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement has identified 8 *Roles of School Leaders*[™]. Job and task analysis with leaders who consistently achieve the highest results reveal that effective leaders ensure these roles are on school teams.

Communicating Benefits

Leaders often err by assuming that people are motivated by the same ideas that motivate them. While others may agree conceptually with team-based improvement, they may not immediately see the benefit for their personal investment of time and energy. Leaders, therefore, must communicate the WIIFM (What's In It For Me?) for each individual, as well as for the organization. For example, a leader trying to engage a teacher who feels she is on the fringes of instructional decisions might say, "Alice, if you agree to join the team that is studying the school's 5th grade math problem, you will be influential in deciding upon the appropriate solutions, and other grade level teachers will look to you for help."

Good leaders know their people and what motivates each of them. Leaders can leverage this information and personalize their appeal to help individuals see the personal benefit of their contribution. As importantly, all team members need to know the value to the organization in joining with others to solve an identified school improvement issue. Effective leaders elicit organizational benefits from the team or share them directly, never leaving the organizational or the personal benefits of team-based improvement to chance.

leaders build collaborative teams: 1) Investing in signature relationship practices –senior leaders demonstrate their commitment to teaming by the way they arrange space, create community or establish social networks. For example, Royal Bank of Scotland's CEO built a private Main Street within headquarters where employees could mingle with colleagues and provided an adjoining business school where employees throughout the company could convene and learn together; 2) Modeling collaborative behavior – when senior leaders walk the talk, teams exhibit more collaborative behavior; 3) Creating *gift cultures* – investing in mentoring and coaching desired behavior builds internal networks; 4) Training in requisite skills – relationship building, communication, and conflict resolution are key; 5) Building a strong sense of community – including social events that help people feel they belong to a corporate family; 6) Selecting *ambidextrous leadership* – those who may begin as task-oriented leaders, but transform to relationship-oriented leaders once team processes are learned and practiced; 7) Building on *heritage relationships* – making sure at least some of team members know and trust each other; 8) Providing role clarity and task ambiguity – sharply defining roles to decrease uncertainty, but allowing team members flexibility in achieving the task.

Communicating Benefits

Leaders often err by assuming that people are motivated by the same ideas that motivate them. While others may agree conceptually with team-based improvement, they may not immediately see the benefit for their personal investment of time and energy. Leaders, therefore, must communicate the WIIFM (What's In It For Me?) for each individual, as well as for the organization. For example, a leader trying to engage a teacher who feels she is on the fringes of instructional decisions might say, "Alice, if you agree to join the team that is studying the school's 5th grade math problem, you will be influential in deciding upon the appropriate solutions, and other grade level teachers will look to you for help."

Good leaders know their people and what motivates each of them. Leaders can leverage this information and personalize their appeal to help individuals see the personal benefit of their contribution. As importantly, all team members need to know the value to the organization in joining with others to solve an identified school improvement issue. Effective leaders elicit organizational benefits from the team or share them directly, never leaving the organizational or the personal benefits of team-based improvement to chance.