A Tale of Two Schools, or The Role of a Principal in a Collaborative Culture

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How do the decisions and actions of a school principal determine the degree to which a faculty chooses to work collaboratively? In my work with administrators and their staffs in a large urban district, I've seen firsthand two very different approaches. These principals' stories give life to the research observations of author Warren Bennis, who said, "Management is getting people to do what needs to be done. Leadership is getting people to want to do what needs to be done. Managers push. Leaders pull. Managers command. Leaders communicate."

In one school (fictitiously named Parktown), I watched teachers make a tremendous shift: they began opening their doors and breaking down their isolation, co-planning and co-teaching, examining student work and sharing teaching practice. Meanwhile, in another school (fictitiously named Brighton) less than 5 miles away, the teachers expressed a sense of fragmentation and continuing isolation as they struggled to reorganize into small learning communities and implement new lesson designs in English and algebra classes.

At Parktown School, the English department spent most of this past school year piloting three sets of standards-based designed lessons, taking notes on their implementation of the curriculum and on the modifications they made to meet students' needs. In October, these teachers started out demonstrating strong resistance to the use of the teaching units that were provided to them. Despite their resistance within a few months, they had begun examining students' work (initially alone or in very small groups with the literacy coach) and providing feedback and ideas for revision to the consultants who had designed the units.

The school's second-year principal listened to their concerns, discussed the units and shared teachers' feedback with district personnel, and supported the literacy coach in her work with the teachers in the English department. In mid-January, the literacy coach became one of the first in the district to begin consistently co-teaching the lessons with a colleague, planning and reflecting on both process and progress together. The principal, an assistant principal, and the coach offered the teachers additional paid time to meet together to collaborate on the shared lessons. Perhaps most importantly, they all backed off when the teachers resisted the opportunity to work together.

By March, the tone of the Parktown teachers' interactions had begun to change. They brought student work to professional development meetings and shared with colleagues from other district schools. They provided district staff with samples of revisions they'd made to the lessons; citations of other resources they had used to augment the designs in order to provide necessary scaffolding for students; and copies of entries from their reflection journals. In June, the principal participated fully in two days of professional development along with the teachers. She and the literacy coach joined the classroom teachers in writing, sharing, and revising short memoirs. By the end of the second day, the principal approached district leaders with her teachers' request: "We'd like to come in for a full day of planning, a week after school is out, before people leave town for vacations and before some of us start teaching summer school. Is the funding still available?"

A few miles away, Brighton School's veteran principal juggled the demands of multiple initiatives required by the central district: conversion of the large school into small learning communities; implementation of designed lessons in algebra; and incorporation of required reforms that

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had resulted from district- and state-supported evaluations of the school's instructional programs. Resistance to the reforms was widespread and deeply rooted. Members of one entire department at Brighton School informed a literacy coach that he "should not even think about coaching anyone" in their department.

Even though nearly 25 percent of the teaching staff and the administrators had been trained as CFG coaches, a large number of teachers remained resistant to using protocols for looking at student work, or to examining student learning data in any way. A number of teachers and CFG coaches have expressed frustration about the way the CFG work is being implemented: the principal requires all faculty members to participate in monthly CFG meetings held during school time; all CFGs face a mandated reorganization at the end of each school year, with the members being reshuffled, necessitating months of work developing trust among newly-formed groups. Some staff members were happy with the reassignments, because their CFGs had been only moderately effective, or even dysfunctional, all year. Other faculty members were highly disappointed about the changes in membership, because they felt they were just beginning to get past the "getting-to-know-you" stages, and were starting to do some substantive work together.

The initial phase of development of the small learning communities at Brighton was described by one teacher as "very similar to picking softball teams when we were kids: the people who were considered weak players were picked last. We've put into place a system of tracking the teachers even before we figure out which students will be part of any of the SLCs. I'm afraid we're going to be tracking the kids, too."

At Brighton, there was high motivation to do the right things for the students. The principal and his administrative staff put forth tremendous efforts and committed substantial resources to professional development and to well-grounded research-based approaches. They consistently communicated a sense of urgency around the need to do a better job for the students in their school. Often, though, it seemed that in the fervor to get "the right things" in place immediately, there was not sufficient time to make sure that there was a sense of ownership of the changes among the people who would carry out the work (or not).

What principal moves may have contributed to the differences in culture at these two schools? The framework below from Ulrich, Zenger and Smallwood, *Results-Based Leadership,* may offer some insights:

What do successful leaders do?

Summary of Leadership Attribute Frameworks

- **Set Direction**
  (vision … future)
- **Demonstrate Personal Character**
  (habits, integrity, trust, analytical thinking)
- **Mobilize Individual Commitment**
  (engage others, share power)
- **Engender Organizational Capacity**
  (build teams, manage teams)

At Parktown, the principal **set direction** by communicating a clear focus on the importance of examining data and student work to inform and improve instructional practices and decision making, including her own. She **mobilized individual commitment** by celebrating innovation and effort, and giving people the space and the confidence to take the initiative to make their own improvements. She **demonstrated personal character** and habits of leadership by analyzing data, including student work, as one of many tools to provide needed information, and by encouraging others to challenge and question the data along with her. These conversations about what's going on with our efforts for our students were conducted formally in faculty meetings, and informally in the hallways. Additionally, the fact that their principal dedicated time to learn right along with the faculty delivered a significant message to the teachers about the importance of the work in which they were engaged together. She **engendered organizational capacity** by practicing the patience necessary to allow teams to become ready to form, rather than mandating that pseudo-teams must give the appearance of working together.

As a result, the literacy coach has begun to collaborate with the math coach at Parktown and with the literacy and math coach at another school to incorporate lesson study into the practices of both the departments at both schools. The two literacy coaches have enrolled in a summer Critical Friends Group Institute to gain the tools and the habits of thinking that will support the work they're starting with the lesson study model. (They recognized the need for specific processes for focusing the observation and feedback sessions, and for learning from student work. Such processes had not been provided in the lesson study train-

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ing they had attended.) The English department members have completed their all-day summer meeting, and are now primed to implement the first designed unit and to use the lesson study approach as a vehicle for their collaborative work.

In the words of their literacy coach… The doors are always open for anyone to come in and talk, regardless of who it is. Our leaders are approachable and want to help. The administration ensures that there is ample time for teachers to meet and discuss instruction… The principal is an instructional leader in every sense…

Brighton's principal also **set direction** for the work of the school by communicating a sense of urgency around the need to improve student achievement results. He put great effort into **engendering organizational capacity** through the huge investment in professional development for more than 30 CFG coaches. Further support for that effort was evident in the consistent commitment of school time for the groups to meet. The fact that the principal himself participated in the week long CFG coaches' seminar provided additional evidence of the depth of his desire to see the school start to become a professional learning community. Several teachers, however, demonstrated a lack of buy-in for the mandated CFG participation, so that the CFGs' potential positive school wide impact instead became a missed opportunity for the principal to **mobilize individual commitment**.

If Warren Bennis is correct in his observation that "Management is getting people to do what needs to be done. Leadership is getting people to want to do what needs to be done," then it appears that both principals are good managers, while Parktown's principal is the more effective leader. How might district leaders design ways for principals to share, reflect upon, and collaboratively improve their practices, so that students benefit equitably from effective leadership at all schools? How might school principals, like the teachers did at Parktown, create their own structures for this type of collaborative leading and learning to take place? ■

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medium for analysis is two fold. First of all, most educators of all colors working in urban high schools are not familiar with hip-hop, and what little they do know repulses them. Second, hip-hop is complex. It is not readily decipherable. As with a Toni Morrison novel, the reader must work to understand the text and its plethora of meanings and interpretations. It is in our best interest and in the best interest of those of us who want to engage poor, young, black urban youth to refuse to be deceived by the image of hip-hop that is promoted. We must do our homework and research for ourselves the power, complexities, and engaging literacy of hip-hop music and its culture. We must inform and reeducate ourselves so that we can in turn provide a hip-hop curriculum that is simultaneously engaging and academically rigorous for poor black urban males. Once we have engaged the poor, black urban males in embracing an academically rigorous curriculum that will lead to success in school and in life, it then behooves us to use the same curriculum to engage all of American youth. I propose that hip-hop has become a global phenomenon which bridges all cultures and all continents in ways that no other art form has.

Among the excellent resources I've found to assist us in connecting the study of hip-hop to the development of literacy skills for reluctant and struggling readers, the following two stand out:

- Dr. Alfred Tatum's *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* (See "It is not Rocket Science", *Connections*, Winter 2006)
- Dr. Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*.

Chapter 5 "B-Boys, Players, and Preachers: Reading Masculinity" describes the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane and the complexity in Hip Hip artistic expressions. For example, Dr. Perry explains,

> In 'Get Down' Craig Mack rhymes:
>
> *Imma reign*
> *Reign forever*
> *Rain like bad weather*
> *Reign like whoever never*
> *A brand new sheriff that's in town*
> *Getting down*
> *Leavin' bodies in the ground*
>
> Using the homophone reign/rain, he puts a multiplicity of meanings in the oral space of his self-identification. His "royalty"

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