Exploring Five Core Leadership Capacities

Promoting Collaborative Learning Cultures: Putting the Promise into Practice

The case for collaborative learning cultures – and their direct impact on school improvement and student achievement – has been made so consistently and conclusively that collaborative approaches of one form or another have become a common feature of effective education practice in Ontario.

Yet most education researchers and practitioners would agree that we may have, individually and collectively, only begun to scratch the surface. What does a genuine collaborative learning culture look like? Are we there yet? If not, how can we move beyond structural change and bring about this kind of deep cultural change? What are the necessary conditions for establishing an authentic collaborative learning culture? How can we evolve from an organization of individual learners to a true learning organization in which knowledge is shared, developed and applied and practice is deprivatized? How can we build networks beyond our own individual walls to embrace – and bene t from – a system-wide collaborative learning culture? And how can we help ensure that the work of educators coming together results not only in more knowledge, but also signi cantly improved practice in classrooms?

Re-Focusing on the BIG Picture: Deepening Our Understanding of Collaboration

In this issue of *Ideas Into Action* we explore research foundations supporting collaborative learning cultures, and present a sampling

The Challenge: From Concept to Reality

So what should we know that we don't know? While the underlying concepts may be relatively straightforward – and the objectives clear – the business of realizing an authentic collaborative learning culture requires that leaders recognize the depth of this task, and the multitude of challenges that need to be addressed along the way. Developing a collaborative learning culture is a process, rather than a destination, and one that requires knowledge, skills and persistence.

The Complexity of Culture Change

In the language of Heifetz and Linsky (2002), turning around school and system cultures is an adaptive – rather than a technical – challenge. As illustrated in the chart below, technical problems may be very complex and critically important, but they have known solutions that can be implemented through current knowledge. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization's current structures and procedures. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative experience to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating new capacity to thrive.

Kind of challenge	Problem de nition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical & Adaptive	Clear	Requiresg LC ehniq	o y eLC oluC San C C stakeho l dr se
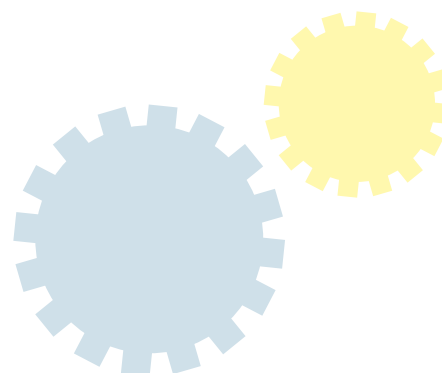
Resistance to Change

In *Change the Way You Lead Change*, Herold and Fedor (2008) point out that it is one thing to lead change when you enjoy high-quality relationships with followers. However, it is another thing to do so when you are still in the process of establishing such relationships, and it is yet quite another to do so when the quality of such relationships is damaged.

In their words:

"People do not naturally resist change; they resist change they do not understand, the value of which they do not see, or the demands of which they cannot meet. It is a change leader's job to motivate others to follow and to make it possible for them to do so. Change leaders are not born. They come in all shapes and sizes but they work with what they have and can achieve success using many approaches, as long as what they do ts with the situation in which they nd themselves. People are not unfortunate obstacles to change plans; they are the key elements in these plans. Cultivating people's commitment to the organization and to the leader may be the most important change tool leaders have."

> "Think 'system' and not 'individual school' if the goal is to fundamentally change the culture of schools."
>
> – Fullan, 2008

The Issue of System Cohesion

All systems, particularly larger systems, face the problem of how to achieve cohesion, which Fullan (2009) refers to as the "too-tight-too-loose" dilemma. Focus the organization with sharp goals and tight accountability, says Fullan, and you get passive or alienated workers. Go for decentralized creativity and you get drift and inertia. The key to achieving tight-loose organization lies more in "purposeful peer interaction" (Fullan, 2009) than in top-down direction from the hierarchy. This does not require less leadership at the top, according to Fullan, "but rather more – more of a different kind". Fullan suggests positive peer interaction works effectively under three conditions:

1. When the larger values of the organization and those of individuals

How Leaders Develop Relational Trust

Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) recently published one of the best syntheses to date of empirical research evidence that illuminates the complex relationship between educational leadership and student outcomes. Among the competencies involved in effective educational leadership, these researchers identify "building relational trust" as essential in schools and systems where the success of one person's efforts is dependent on the contribution of others.

The Principal's Role

In *The Principal's Role in Supporting Learning Communities,* researchers Hord and Hirsh (2009) suggest principals have found that the following approaches support strong learning communities:

- **Emphasize to teachers that you know they can succeed – together:** Particularly in schools with a history of low achievement, lay the groundwork for collaborative learning cultures by letting teachers know that you believe they have the expertise to make student learning happen. Make clear that you expect them to pool that expertise.
- **Expect teachers to keep knowledge fresh:** Let teachers know you expect them to keep their skills up-to-date through collaborative study.
- **Guide communities toward self-direction:** Effective learning communities are democratic and participatory. Share authority and decision-making from the beginning and prepare others to take the lead.
- **Make data accessible:** Support instructional decision-making by ensuring that data on student performance is available in a format that teachers find understandable and that invites interpretation.
- **Teach discussion and decision-making skills:** Especially if collaboration is new in your school, help teachers develop skills in talking and making decisions together. Explain the different modes of dialogue and discussion (See for example, Garmston and Wellman, 2009).
- **Show teachers the research:** Research on professional learning communities indicates that teachers reap benefits such as: collective responsibility for student success, increased understanding of teachers' roles in helping students achieve, feedback and assistance from peers, and professional renewal.
- **Take time to build trust:** Giving teachers guided practice in conducting appropriate conversations, making decisions, and managing conflict will help strengthen trust; so will keeping the focus on building student and teacher learning.

Building School

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examining collaboration as a useful organizer for thinking about and questioning existing practices:

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3. Sharing

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As they point out: "Looking across the four forms of collaboration, it is obvious that joint work is something of a different order that includes deprivatization and a collective commitment to change. Simple intensity of collaboration cannot automatically be taken as a precursor to improvement."

Four principles underpin networked learning:

1. Moral purpose – a commitment to success for all children.
2. Shared leadership.
3. Inquiry-based practice which is evidence- and data-driven learning.
4. Adherence to a model of learning that draws on three elds of knowledge: practitioner, public, and new.

These four principles underline a commitment to collaborative practice and generosity of spirit – hence, networked learning has two key mantras. The rst is that collaboration means working smarter together, rather than harder alone. The second, which represents a critical part of the principle of moral purpose, revolves around learning from, with, and on behalf of, one another.

The Role of School and District Leaders in Supporting NLCs

According to Katz, Earl and Jaafar (2009), formal leadership is critical in the work of NLCs, at both the school and network levels in what these researchers term "enabling activities". They argue that the involvement of formal leaders in such enabling activities is correlated with changes in thinking and practice at both the school and the network levels. Four important roles that formal leaders – whether school or district – play in relation to networks are:

1. Encouraging and motivating others
2. Setting and monitoring the agenda
3. Sharing leadership
4. Building capacity and providing support.

Using Technology to Support Collaboration

Online technologies can provide a powerful platform to support PLCs, NLCs, and other collaborative learning and work teams. Chris Dede (Crow, 2010), a leading researcher in the field at Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers the following observations:

- Online communities can be widely distributed – peers with like goals, knowledge, capacities and learning needs can connect far beyond local boundaries.
- Web 2.0 technologies allow rich collaboration and the sharing of information and resources in a wide variety of media.
- Online communities can be blended with, and support, face-to-face interactions.
- An effective online community will potentially use a wide variety of technologies from wikis, asynchronous discussions and synchro

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U Asynchronous describes events that don't require learners to gather at the same time; they can participate at their own convenience.
U Synchronous describes events that require learners to gather at the same time for collaboration such as a chat or phone call.

– Journal of Staff Development, February, 2010

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Having the capacity to engage in courageous conversations (see Ideas Into Action, Winter Ó ä £ ä ® Ê ˆ Ã Ê > ˜ Ê ˆ ˜ ` ˆ Ã « ¡ ˜ Ã > L•¡Ê«Å¡‡ condition for promoting and leading collaborative learning cultures. Engaging in courageous conversations is about challenging current practices and fostering improvement and growth through conversation and feedback. It requires that leaders build relational trust and establish a culture in which "dif cult" conversations are not only accepted, but seen as necessary for improvement. Likewise, it requires that we challenge assumptions at both the individual and organizational levels. As we lead the shift toward deprivatized and collaborative practice, courageous conversations become a very powerful vehicle through which we can engage in open, trustful and purposeful

The Ontario Context: Collaborative Learning Cultures and the Ontario Leadership Framework

How are these research ndings re ected in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF)? Within the OLF, the core capacity promoting collaborative learning cultures is recognized as vital to successful leadership and is re ected within – and across – all of the framework's domains.

The framework recognizes that promoting collaborative learning cultures is about enabling schools, school communities and districts to work together and learn from each other with a central focus on improved teaching quality and student achievement. It also recognizes that leaders may do this in a variety of ways. For example, they may:

- Facilitate a shared understanding and ownership of student achievement and well-being as a central focus for collaboration among staff, federations, associations, the school board and the diverse school community.
- Improve and build on existing models of professional learning communities.
- Enable teamwork and collective decision-making among teachers and staff, providing opportunities for teacher-leadership.

Walking the Talk:

Professional learning opportunities and resources offered by Ontario Leadership associations:

- **The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL)** invites educators to upload resourcesto APPLIKI a succession planning search engine for Ontario educators found at www.education-leadership-ontario.ca The IEL library currently houses documents and articles to assist school and system leaders to develop their leadership capacity.

- **Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) and Association des gestionnaires de l'éducation franco-ontarienne (AGÉFO):** Beginning in spring 2010 throughout October 2010, ADFO and AGÉFO will be offering tri-level provincial training, a DVD and guide for school and

– *The Principal as Professional Learning Community Leader* from Leading Student Achievement Series (joint Corwin Press/OPC publication) is a print resource providing school administrators with hands-on, practical support to lead the development of PLCs in their schools. Learn more at www.principals.on.ca

OPSOA continues to coordinate a strong mentoring program for new supervisory officers and directors of education emphasizing the collaborative role of the system leader in building a positive and active learning culture. The program utilizes the proven experience of veteran administrators, reviews expert models and establishes networks. Efforts are made through all mentoring teams to establish system-wide learning organizations. Learn more at www.opsoa.org

Selected resources and publications recommended by Ontario leaders:

All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform by Fullan (2010) shows educators what must be done to "strip away distractions and move an entire system forward" and bring about sustainable change that involves all stakeholders.

AllthingsPLC found at www.allthingsplc.info is a clearinghouse for information about establishing and implementing professional learning communities.

Attending to Problems of Practice: Routines and Resources for Professional Learning in Teachers' Workplace Interactions by Horn and Little (2010) investigates how conversational routines, or the practices by which
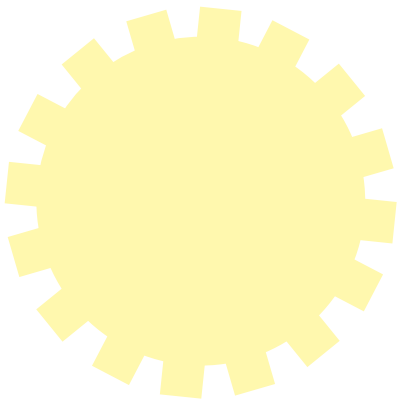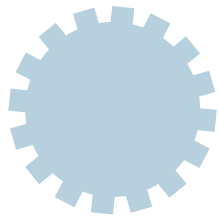
The Institute for Education Leadership (IEL)

Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership is a unique partnership committed to exploring leading-edge thinking on education leadership and applying that expertise to the development of high-quality resources and learning opportunities for school, board, and system leaders. As part of its work on research into practice the IEL has adopted the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) and continues to support and promote it as a powerful vehicle for strengthening school and system leadership in the

- "Principal Quali cations Program (PQP) providers report that *Ideas Into Action* bulletins are a valued resource used to help meet expectations of the program. In the words of one principal council representative, 'keep them coming' as they are a relevant and meaningful support to those who aspire to become principals in future."

- "As a PQP instructor, I use the *Ideas Into Action* bulletins as a resource re ective of current educational research and as a tool for candidates to familiarize themselves with Ontario pedagogy and educational priorities."

- "*Ideas Into Action #2* provided an easy-to-read, concise document. It is a great resource for today's school leaders looking for more information on courageous conversations, how to challenge current practices and foster improvement and growth through conversation, to support teachers as they strive to continuously improve their practice."

Write to us about promoting collaborative learning cultures

We encourage you to share your insights with us about this issue, and tell us about your own experiences with promoting collaborative learning cultures. What has worked for you? What professional learning supports have you found to be effective in strengthening this capacity? We look forward to your responses and to sharing excerpts in the next issue of *Ideas Into Action* which will focus on "setting goals".

Learn more about the Ontario Leadership Strategy at www.ontario.ca/eduleadership.

You will nd more information about Leadership Development on the ministry website and on the website of the Institute of Education Leadership (IEL) at www.education-leadership-ontario.ca
If you have any comments or suggestions, please contact us at: ldb-ddl@ontario.ca.

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Notes