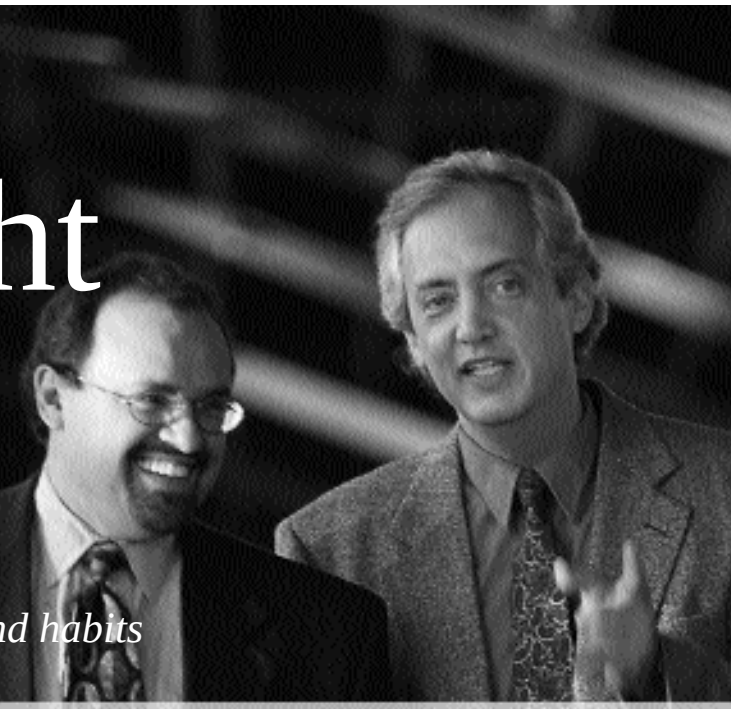
In the right context



The effective leader concentrates on a foundation of programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations, and habits

By RICK DuFOUR

An old story says Ralph Waldo Emerson often began conversations with acquaintances he had not seen in some time by posing the question: "What has become more clear to you since last we met?"

The *Journal of Staff Development* presented me with a similar challenge when it asked that I reflect upon an article I co-authored five years ago titled, "The Principal as Staff Developer" (Berkey & DuFour, 1995).

While I am relieved to conclude the ideas in that article have held up well, some things principals must do to fulfill their responsibilities as staff development leaders have become much clearer to me.

IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Shortly after my article was published, the National Staff Development Council identified professional development standards to help schools and districts assess their programs. Content standards articulated the *what* of professional development — the knowledge and skills staff members should have. Process standards addressed how professional development should be delivered.

Although both the content and process of professional development are significant issues worthy of a principal's attention, I have come to understand the most significant contribution a principal can make to developing others is creating an appropriate context for adult learning. It is context — the programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for a given school — that plays the largest role in determining whether professional development efforts will have an impact on that school.

In the right school context, even flawed professional development activities (such as the much-maligned single-session workshop) can serve as a catalyst for professional growth. Conversely, in the wrong school context, even programs with solid content and powerful training strategies are unlikely to be effective (DuFour, 1998).

When principals recognize how critical school context is to the effectiveness of professional development, important shifts begin. The primary arena for professional development moves from workshops to the workplace. Emphasis shifts from finding the right trainers or speakers to creating opportunities for staff to work together, engage in collective inquiry, and learn from one another. The artificial distinction between teacher work and teacher learning that exists in most schools is eliminated. Opportunities for learning and growth are structured into routine practices. I am convinced the

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single most effective way in which principals can function as staff development leaders is providing a school context that fosters job-embedded professional development.

I have also come to understand that the context principals should strive to create in their schools is the collaborative culture of a professional learning community. Creating a collaborative culture has been described as "the single most important factor" for successful school improvement initiatives, "the first order of business" for those seeking to enhance their schools' effectiveness, an essential requirement of improving schools, the critical element in reform efforts, and the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement (Eastwood and Louis, 1992; Fullan, 1993; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; and McLaughlin, 1995).

But if principals are to create this context of a collaborative culture in their schools, they must do more than encourage teachers to work together. The tradition of teacher isolation is too deep to be uprooted simply by offering opportunities for collegial endeavors. Collaboration by invitation never works. Principals who function as staff development leaders embed collaboration in the structure and culture of their schools. Teachers' work is specifically designed to ensure that every staff member is a contributing member of a collaborative team. Creating an appropriate structure for teacher collaboration is vitally important, but also insufficient. Principals must do more than organize teacher teams and hope for the best. They must provide the focus, parameters, and support to help teams function effectively. More specifically, principals who are staff development leaders must:

1. Provide time for collaboration in the school day and school year. Providing time for teachers to work together does not require keeping students at home and/or an infusion of new resources. Principals as staff development leaders work with staff to identify no-cost strategies that enable teachers to work together on a regular basis while students are on campus.

2. Identify critical questions to guide the work of collaborative teams. The impact of providing time for teachers to engage in collective inquiry will be determined to a great extent by the nature of the questions teachers are considering. Principals must help teams frame questions that focus on critical issues of teaching and learning.

3. Ask teams to create products as a result of their collaboration. The best way to help teachers use their collaborative time productively is to ask them to produce and present artifacts in response to the critical questions they are considering. Examples might

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include statements of student outcomes by units of instruction, development of new units to address gaps between state standards and local curriculum, creation of common assessments and rubrics, articulation of team protocols or norms to guide the interactions of team members, or formulation of improvement plans based on analysis of student achievement data.

4. Insist that teams identify and pursue specific student achievement goals. The driving force behind the effort to create a collaborative culture must be improved results. Principals foster improved results when they ask teaching teams to identify and pursue specific, measurable student achievement goals.

5. Provide teams with relevant data and information. When every teacher has access to information on his or her students' performance in meeting agreed upon standards, on valid assessments, in comparison to other students trying to achieve the same standards, both individual teachers and teams improve their effectiveness.

Simply put, when teachers operate within the context of a learning community, they are more likely to develop professional competence. And it is principals who play the critical role in forging conditions that give rise to the growth of professional communities in schools (Louis, Kruse, and Raywid, 1996).

RESULTS-DRIVEN LEARNING

Some principals continue to cling to the notion that they function as staff development leaders when they offer a potpourri of professional development opportunities for staff. These peripatetic principals strive to expose their staff to every new educational fad in order to keep their schools on the "cutting edge." This eagerness to pursue change and embrace every "new thing" results in what has been referred to as the "Christmas tree" school. Programs, training, and initiatives are simply hung on the existing structure and culture of the school like the ornaments on a Christmas tree. Like ornaments, they never become truly organic or part of the tree. They dangle fragilely without ever being absorbed into the school's culture.

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Principals who function as staff development leaders recognize that professional development is a means to an end — improved student achievement. They work with faculty to identify the specific competencies that are most critical in helping staff achieve that end; they design purposeful, goal-oriented strategies and programs to develop those competencies; and they sustain the commitment to those strategies and programs until staff acquire and use the intended knowledge and skills. They assess the impact of professional development not on the basis of the number of offerings or initial enthusiasm for the offerings, but on the basis of improved results.

The emphasis on results also means that building the group's collective capacity to achieve schoolwide goals must become a higher priority than the individual's independent learning. The traditional structure of schools has emphasized developing individual knowledge and skills. Each staff member has been provided incentives to take courses from a myriad of universities or to attend random conferences and workshops based upon personal interests. But it is time for a profession that has been fiercely protective of individual autonomy to acknowledge that individual development does not ensure organizational development. The random learnings of staff members may contribute little to a school's ability to solve its problems.

A famous symphony conductor once commented that while he wanted each violin player in the orchestra to work at becoming a better violin player, developing individual skills did not result in a great orchestra. He also had to help each section of the orchestra develop its ability to work together as a section. Finally, he had to ensure that each member and each section heard the music the same way, that they had a common sense of what they were trying to accomplish. Principals who function as staff development leaders function in much the same way. They want each 3rd grade teacher to work at becoming a better teacher, but they realize a focus on individual development will not create a great school. They must also help the 3rd grade team learn to function in ways that strengthen the entire 3rd grade. Most importantly, they must keep everyone in the school committed to a shared vision of improved learning for all.

MODELING

Principals who hope to encourage others to continue to grow and learn professionally must remember the words of Albert Schweitzer: "Example isn't the best way to influence others — it's the only way." When principals model a commitment to their own ongoing professional development, when they demonstrate openness to new experiences and ideas, when they are willing to pose questions and engage in action research, they increase the likelihood that others on the staff will make a similar commitment.

No principal could ever hope to know enough to be a resource in every content area for everyone in the school. Therefore, principals must identify areas for their own professional development that offer the most powerful leverage points for advancing the school toward its goals.

Because the fundamental purpose of school is learning, principals must become students of the teaching-learning process. Because learning communities require shared vision and collective commitments, principals must become

skilled in building consensus and resolving conflict.

Because clarity of communication helps signal priorities and focus improvement efforts, principals must develop powerful strategies for communicating effectively. Because learning communities are results-oriented and committed to continuous improvement, principals must become proficient in gathering and reporting data in ways that are meaningful to teachers. Because the transformation of traditional school cultures into professional learning communities is a difficult task replete with obstacles, frustrations, and setbacks, principals must learn how to encourage the hearts of those with whom they work. This is by no means an exhaustive list. It is, however, representative of the kind of professional development principals could pursue to help those within a school accomplish their collective goals.

How can principals develop these skills? Read voraciously, secure a mentor, participate in a principal network, create a guiding coalition within the school to help generate, assess, and refine improvement strategies. Most importantly, look continuously for experiences that offer an opportunity for professional growth. There is much wisdom in the adage, "Leadership cannot be taught, but it can be learned."

There are those who contend that school improvement initiatives have suffered because schools are too dependent upon their principals, that the influence of the principal must be lessened in order for schools to function as learning communities. I do not subscribe to that theory. In fact, I believe schools need strong, effective leadership from principals more than ever. But the nature of that leadership is not the autocratic "my-way-or-the-highway" model of the past. Principals who embrace their role as staff development leaders act in accordance with the tenets of servant-leadership. As Robert Greenleaf (1990) described this model of leadership:

The servant-leader is servant first.… It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.… The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (p. 7).

When principals focus on creating an environment in which people are working toward a shared vision and honoring collective commitments to one another, an environment in which all staff are provided with structures and supports that foster collaborative efforts and continuous professional growth, an environment in which each teacher has someone to turn to and talk to when confronted with challenges, they address one of the deepest yearnings in the hearts of most teachers: To make a positive difference in the lives of their students. And in helping teachers address that fundamental need, they increase the likelihood that teachers will themselves become servant-leaders to their students. And that is what the principal as staff development leader is all about.

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