Building a Strong Team

Leadership in Practice

Written by Michael Rothman

A school, like any organization, is comprised of nothing more—and nothing less— than the people who make it run day in and day out. Assemble a team of talented adults and help them work to their full potential, and you are well on your way to having an effective school. In discussions with principals of new and successful schools, six approaches in particular helped them to build strong teams: hiring staff with the right beliefs; looking for resilience, reflectiveness, and responsibility in new hires; putting structures in place for staff to collaborate vertically and horizontally; tending to individual relationships; valuing dissent; and bringing staff into the hiring process.

A school, like any organization, is comprised of nothing more—and nothing less— than the people who make it run day in and day out. Assemble a team of talented adults and help them work to their full potential, and you are well on your way to having an effective school. This is easier described, however, than delivered. In discussions with principals of new and successful schools, six approaches in particular arose again and again that helped them to build strong teams. This review of *Leadership in Practice* delves into these six findings:

1. Looking first and foremost at staff beliefs when making hiring decisions;
2. Hiring staff who bring resilience, reflectiveness, and responsibility;
3. Tending to individual relationships;
4. Valuing dissent;
5. Putting structures in place for your team to connect vertically and horizontally; and
6. Bringing this year's staff into next year's hiring process.

In addition to a discussion of these six findings, this document provides three scenarios that help elucidate real-life application of these ideas. These scenarios, based on actual experiences of principals, are intended to challenge the thinking of those studying to become principals, and reveal some of the nuance that is harder to convey in recommendations alone. They include a:

A.   Hiring decision;
B.   One-on-one conversation with a disgruntled teacher;
C.   Response to the unpopular teacher in a staff meeting.

Leadership in Practice consists of four articles on related topics: building a strong team, providing instructional leadership, using data effectively, and serving all children. These are designed for use by aspiring and new principals and their coaches and mentors, especially those leading—or planning to lead—the opening of a new school.

I. Seek Beliefs, Develop Teaching

In the choice between hiring someone who has strong teaching skills but whose beliefs aren't quite right for your school and someone whose skills aren't the strongest but whose beliefs are right, choose the latter.   "A successful school relies on a strong culture," Hector Calderon, principal of El Puente Academy for Social Justice explains. "You can't create that culture if people don't start with the right beliefs." Those beliefs will vary from school to school, but some are obvious: belief in the ability of all students to succeed and belief in the ideas enshrined in the school's mission are key.

If this is important in general, it is absolutely critical in the school's first year. Founding principals consistently emphasized that the culture that the first team of teachers brought to the school became a defining foundation upon which the school was later built. How far should you go to find the right people? Principal Li Yan of the Dual Language School for Asian Studies, which school boasts the remarkable achievement of having no teacher turnover in its six years of existence, felt it was so important that when he couldn't find the right people at the beginning of the school's first year, he hired retired teachers to temporarily work in some of his classrooms, holding one spot as long as eight months while he was searching for the right person.

Knowing what you want, however, is easier than knowing when you've found it. One principal suggested one simple question that helped her quickly discern candidate's beliefs: "How will the school's mission and vision manifest in your classroom?" Another principal suggests that asking about strategies can help you ascertain beliefs: a teacher who can at least speak of several different strategies for classroom management and engagement is someone who has thought about how to reach diverse students.

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II. Hire Staff with the 3 R's: Reflectiveness, Resilience, and Responsibility

Often when hiring, principals will ask many questions about teaching and classroom management, but entirely overlook specific traits and attributes that are critical for a strong team. When highlighting the most important features in new hires, virtually all principals agree on three critical skills and habits of mind:

Reflectiveness. In the course of hiring, you may get so excited about someone's ability to talk about their way of doing things, that you miss the fact that they aren't open to anyone else's. Principals repeatedly highlight the importance of having staff members who are self-reflective. Look for their willingness to rethink their own beliefs in the course of an interview. To get at this, it can help to make people a little uncomfortable in an interview, force them to defend their views or to admit to failures, and see how they react. Are they thoughtful? Are they willing to admit mistakes? Will they intelligently rethink beliefs on the spot?

> "One of my best hires was a teacher who had given a mediocre model lesson. I gave her a few critical pieces of feedback. She came back for a second round and redid the lesson, and I could see that she had really thought about my feedback. From that I knew she was really reflective."
>
> *Michele Shannon*

Resilience. Another key skill is alternately described as being "resilient" or "socially adept." The first year of a school is particularly difficult. But even beyond the first year, you need people who are able to bounce back after a difficult day or after a difficult discussion with a colleague. Questions about past experiences can help get at this. Another approach is to have someone on your hiring committee who has good "radar" for gauging how comfortably people interact with others in the course of the interview.

Responsibility. In the first year, you rely on a building a team that will take responsibility for themselves and the school. "I was lucky," Kathleen Elvin says, "to find people who were both good at getting a project started and would take responsibility for seeing it through to completion." Learn from Kathleen's luck and look for evidence of this kind of personality in a new hire.

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III. Look for (and Listen to) the 'I' in Team

The saying goes, "There is no 'I' in team." But the principals we spoke to might differ on that point. Most emphasized the critical importance of building one-on-one relationships, especially in the first year of

the school. Danika Lacroix, principal of Young Scholars' Academy for Discovery and Exploration, made sure she had spoken with every staff member in the summer before the school year began. Derek Jones, principal of Excelsior Preparatory High School, noted that he spoke one-on-one with every staff member at least once a week throughout the school's first year.

> "In conversations with staff, you have be a good listener and not be defensive. These aren't things that come naturally. I've had to practice them. I want staff to realize I'm not going to solve every problem, but I will listen and seek to understand. You have to coach people to complain, raise concerns, and turn them into something constructive for the school."
>
> *Kathleen Elvin*

These conversations are, of course, impossible to sustain once the school is larger. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't happen. While the school is small, these one-on-one conversations help to lay the foundation for the strong team that will carry its success in the future. If you as the principal can have these conversations with your first-year staff, then you can model for them the value and importance of having similar conversations with colleagues as the school grows.

What do those one-on-one conversations look like? Principals consistently emphasized three messages they convey:

I hear you. First, the principal must be an active listener. Kathleen Elvin emphasizes that a good principal needs to know how to bite her tongue and listen, hearing complaints and criticisms alike as valuable ways of getting necessary feedback to improve the school. In a profession where many people bring strong viewpoints, such openness helps build a team able to collaborate because they are willing to constructively disagree.

I respect you. You hired this person for a reason, and if you expect them to be part of an effective team, you should show them the respect they deserve. Li Yan posits respect for his staff as one of the biggest reasons for his school's success. He and other principals draw the parallel between their treatment of staff and staff treatment of students. Hector Calderon puts it this way: "We have a message we send to students: 'This is important. You can do this. I won't give up on you.' I send the same message to teachers." He adds, however, "of course, with the teachers there is a caveat" that you can and will eventually give up on them if they do not continue to earn your respect and follow through on your requests. Most of the principals marked this caveat for staff as something that would occur after at least one to two years of trying to help a teacher improve (for more on this, see the *Leadership in Practice* article on "Providing Instructional Leadership").

I expect you to be thoughtful. Much as principals emphasized reflectiveness as an important quality in a new hire, they emphasize pushing self-reflection in one-on-one conversations. Principals offer up stock questions—"Tell me one or two important things you want to improve for next year?" or

"What did you think of that lesson?" or "Help me to understand this…"—that they ask teachers in order to get their thoughtful reflections in a conversation.

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V. Value Dissent

At the same time as it is important to tend to individual relationships in order to build a strong team, at times it is also important to take a stance publicly that shows you are not swayed by individual relationships. No matter what you say in one-on-one conversations, and no matter how enlightened your policies are, you are bound to hear dissension arise in public meetings. You will hear opinions that you don't agree with often stated in ways that are negative and do little to move towards a solution.

> "You have to trust and show respect to your teachers or you'll get nowhere. I've heard people say, 'I'm the principal. I can tell you what to do.' You can tell them, but they don't have to do it."
>
> *Li Yan*

When faced with such dissent, principals emphasize the importance of respecting it and valuing it. Li Yan emphasizes this as part of the work of building a sense of trust and respect in the school. Danika Lacroix emphasizes that it is part of creating an open environment where she and her staff can learn and change if need be.

Valuing dissent means vocally defending the right of your staff to voice their opinions and viewpoints in a constructive way, and asking that they be heard even if you don't agree with them. It means acting more as a moderator than a debater, emphasizing that "we should listen because we can learn from this," and making it as easy as possible for people to offer different viewpoints and listen respectfully to one another.

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V. Carve Out Collaboration both Vertical and Horizontal

In a profession where teachers spend so much time as the only staff member in a classroom full of students, time for teachers to get together with their colleagues must be carefully and intentionally created in the daily schedule. Virtually all the principals in this study had found ways to clear between one and three dedicated periods every day for teachers to collaborate with colleagues. They tended to use this time for a variety of different things, but four features in particular standout:

Vertical Collaboration. Most schools incorporate some form of "vertical" collaboration into planning time, usually in one period per week. These meetings bring together staff who teach the same subject but at different levels. Their conversations are typically structured around questions of teaching—for instance, developing curriculum maps, aligning instruction to state exams or standards, critiquing one another's lesson plans, or developing assessments together.

Horizontal Collaboration. "Horizontal" meetings usually occur at least one to two periods per week. These meetings bring together staff who teach the same group of students in the same grade or at the same level, but in different subject areas. Their conversations are typically structured around questions of learning—for instance, picking one to two struggling students and exploring examples of their behavior, class work, and assessments in different classrooms.

Full-Staff Meetings. In your first year, full staff meetings can occur at least once a week. At most schools, this frequency continued beyond the first year. Several principals made sure to use full-staff meetings exclusively for administrative matters. In this way, they ensured that administrative matters did not encroach on time in other meetings.

One-on-One Meetings. As related above, focusing on one-on-one relationships especially in the first year can help build a strong team by setting a tone for how staff should related to one another. Most principals used planning time in the schedule in the first year to pull individual teachers into one-on-one conversations as often as they could. Later, this time will become subsumed by other team meetings as the school grows.

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VI. Get Staff in on the Hiring Process

When going from first year to second year, seek broad input from your staff in the hiring process. This will pay off in two ways: First, you'll get the perspective of your current team on your future team. Second, the very process of going through the hiring process will help your team get an even better understanding of and appreciation for the hard work of the school; in essence, you are building your first-year team by asking them to help you build your second-year team (something that can, of course, continue into third year, fourth year, and beyond). At Excelsior Prep, the entire first-year staff became the hiring committee for the second year. At Young Scholars' Academy, every applicant's name is given to three randomly selected teachers who are responsible for calling them and giving their input before they can be invited to an interview.

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These recommendations—to hire staff based on beliefs, resilience, reflectiveness, and responsibility; to put structures in place for collaboration and guide them lightly but firmly; to tend to individual relationships; and involve staff in the hiring process—reflect the wisdom gleaned from seven principals who helped start and lead new schools.

To think further about what these recommendations look like in practice, the following pages provide scenarios based on the experiences of these principals. In addition, you can turn to other *Leadership in Practice* articles focusing on "Providing Instructional Leadership," "Using Data Effectively," and "Serving All Children."

The recommendations in these articles are based on interviews with seven principals: Hector Calderon, Kathleen Elvin, Derek Jones, Danika Lacroix, Janet Price, Michele Shannon, and Li Yan. These

principals have in common the fact that they are at the helm of schools that have achieved strong results in assessments of school quality and student learning—five at high schools, one at a 6-12 secondary school, and one at an elementary school. These principals had at least seven, and as much as twenty, years experience teaching before becoming principals, though beyond this their paths to the principalship varied—one was a social worker, another a speech pathologist, another an education lawyer. All seven were engaging in the challenging task of creating a new school from scratch; six of them as founding principals and one as a staff member who later became principal.

This work was sponsored by the New York City Department of Education Office of School Leadership Development in collaboration with New Leaders for New Schools, organizations that together helped train six of the seven principals.

A. The Hiring Interview

Which one of these interviewees would you hire and why?

Candidate 1

Q: Why did you leave your previous school?

A: There was no discipline there.

Q: So what did you do about it?

A: I did what I could, but it's hard when you're in a place where the principal never backs you up and nobody ever enforces the rules. The kids just run roughshod over the teachers and nobody does anything about it.

Candidate 2

Q: Why did you leave your previous school?

A: The principal and I didn't see eye to eye, so I decided it was best to leave.

Q: I'm not going to hire someone who leaves whenever we don't see eye to eye. What happened?

A: I have been working in the system for nearly 20 years. I know IEP's and I knew that at my school IEP's weren't being adhered to. I went over the problems carefully with the principal and reviewed what we could be doing instead. I think she started to feel threatened and eventually, she just wouldn't put up with me anymore. I guess I can be a little difficult.

Candidate 3

Q: Why did you leave your previous school?

A: It was just a one-year placement. It was my student-teaching year.

Q: What did you think of it?

A: It was a great place and I felt I was really able to connect to the kids. I loved it.

Q: C'mon, we're talking about your first year teaching! It's not all easy. What was challenging?

A: I guess sometimes it can be difficult. But I love the kids. I am really excited about teaching. This is such a great chance to make a difference.

When Michele Shannon was choosing between three interviewees similar to the three above, she chose the second. The first seemed to blame others and not take responsibility for her own actions. The third did not seem to be very self-reflective or self-critical. The second, however, was willing to speak her mind, and even though she might challenge authority, she seemed to be socially aware and thoughtful as she did so.

B. The Science Teacher and the Freeloaders

Your school is in the middle of its third year. Mr. G, a committed science teacher who helped you found the school, storms into your office. "Listen, I'm tired of this. These new teachers are coming in and freeloading off all the hard work we've done creating this place. And I'm getting tired of you just sitting by and letting it happen. You've got to step in and stop them from walking all over us, or you'll have a lot of your best teachers leaving this place." *How would you respond?*

When faced with a similar situation at her school, Kathleen Elvin made sure to do three things:

1. *Rather than jump into defensive mode, she focused on questions that helped make sure she could listen openly to the teacher. "Can you explain a bit more? Can you help me understand what's been happening that's leading to this?"*

2. *Such questions could easily sound patronizing if they weren't followed by a genuine openness to what the teacher was saying. She actively tried to understand the root cause of the perceived problem. In this case, her questions led her to understand that the teacher felt new staff did not fully understand the values and culture of the school.*

3. *She aimed to have an endpoint that enlisted the math teacher in actively and creatively helping to solve the problem. In this scenario, once they had identified the problem, she asked him if he could organize a full-day PD for new staff. Her key question: "Can you help me make this work?"*

C. The Unpopular Naysayer

You are sitting on a grade-level team meeting, after having heard concerns from two teachers on the team that one of their colleagues is pulling discussion off track and always negative.   This isn't a surprise to you: you have seen the teacher in staff meetings, finding the holes in every argument, and are trying to figure out how to address it.

While in the meeting, the teachers are talking about their plan for students to correct their own tests and then review results with peers as a way of deepening learning. "That'll never work," the teacher says. As she does, you see more than one pair of rolling eyes. "Don't listen if you want to, but I'm telling you, the kids who don't do well will all feel stigmatized and the kids who do well will feel like it's a waste of their time. At it is, we don't have enough time to cover everything we have to. This will just make it harder."

By the time she is done, all the other teachers are looking away in some combination of frustration and embarrassment. You know they are waiting for you to say something. What do you say?

This is based on a situation confronted by Danika Lacroix. Emphasizing the importance of valuing dissent in order to build an open and thoughtful community, Danika's response was twofold:

1. ***Value dissent.*** *First, she defended the naysayer. "This is helpful. We need to listen to what Ms. L has to say. If we all thought the same thing, we'd never get anywhere.."*
2. ***Coach complaints into feedback.*** *Second, she encouraged her to state her concerns in a more constructive way. This was simple enough, by simply asking: "Explain more about your concerns."*
3. ***Moderate, don't debate.*** *Third, she stepped into the role of moderator, allowing staff to discuss the concerns and putting her faith in the fact that they would come to an intelligent conclusion.*