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# Practitioner Leadership

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## *Practitioner Leadership*

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I had been a principal for about five years, in a large elementary school of about 650 when I first became aware of what can be called practitioner or teacher leadership. It was after school and I received a phone call from my assistant superintendent asking that I participate in a workshop the following afternoon. She advised that it would be important for me to bring a teacher. It was one of those requests that is called a 'command performances'. I raced around the building and found Laura, one of the grade seven teachers. Laura was a fairly new teacher with a young family and I hated to impose on her time but I was quite desperate and as no one else was available, I took the plunge. Thankfully after telling her my predicament she agreed to help me out. The workshop turned out to be the beginning of a new way of working at our school. It was an introduction to the BC Performance Standards and both Laura and I became excited at how these standards could help us in our efforts to improve the writing skills of our students. The following day we began to 'talk up' what we had heard and started gathering people who were interested in exploring this new way of teaching and learning. We wanted to embed our learning in our daily work. We formed a small but enthusiastic team. Because I was no more knowledgeable in the work we were exploring than anyone else on the team, it was natural for me to fall into the role of fellow teacher and learner rather than principal. I didn't have a teaching assignment so I would 'borrow' a classroom, work with various members of the team in their classrooms, review lessons with them; team-teach and generally help out where I could. We presented our work at staff meetings and the enthusiasm, in varying degrees, spread to other members of the staff. Soon it became obvious that Laura was a leader in this work as much as I was – she gained her leadership through her contribution to the learning of the students and our colleagues. In fact the leadership Laura displayed and was awarded by our staff trumped my positional leadership in this particular situation. It turned out that the project we had engaged in to improve students' writing provided us with much more than a gain in student achievement. It had a side benefit of changing the way we, the adults, engaged in our professional learning and our day-to-day work. In fact, in hindsight I believe that it was not the

content of the project that made a difference to our way of working at the school but rather it was simply that we started and worked through an inquiry together. The culture of our school changed. Over time various teachers and other staff members took many more meaningful leadership roles in various projects and areas, some because of their expertise and knowledge, others for their organizational skills and still others because of a desire to try something different. By the time I left the school, there was no longer one leader but rather a multitude of leaders – leaders that came forward at different times and for different reasons.

At some point during this experience 'I got it'. I changed my view of leadership. When I first began my career as a principal my idea of a good leader was mainly based on what I had experienced and been taught. Basically the model of leadership that I prescribed to was one of the 'great person variety'. It spoke of the few, through their power, charisma, celebrity, knowledge or status, providing the leadership for the many. I had the vision of being the charismatic principal who created a vision of the ideal school, set expectations for both students and staff and led the organization to become the best school in the district and the province. What I finally realized and subscribed to was a different perspective of leadership that encompassed many leaders at all levels of the organization providing leadership through their contributions rather than through positional power or formal authority. I eventually became quite happy to share my 'Super Woman' cape with those who had as many super powers as I had.

This perspective of leadership encompasses what we might call practitioner or teacher leadership, a form of distributed leadership. Practitioner or teacher leadership is aptly named. It is leadership that is shared among the practitioners of the organization. However, it was not until sometime later that I learned that the leadership was not just shared; there was something more. It was not just the passing of the leadership torch that made the difference. The fact that Laura took the lead in our project was only part of the change. More importantly, it was the interactions among the team members, the leaders, the followers, the questioners and the skeptics that made the leadership in the school so different. It is this part of the work that James Spillane claims is the essence of distributed leadership and that I refer to as well when talking about practitioner leadership. James Spillane (2006) describes the pitfalls of merely passing the mantle from one leader to the other. In this kind of scenario we are simply creating

more heroic leaders, a few more superheroes, whose valiant acts are cast in starring roles and all other team members and acts are cast in mere minor or supporting roles. "Leadership involves mortals as well as heroes. It involves the many and not just the few. It is about leadership practice, not simply roles and positions. And leadership practice is about interactions, not just the actions of heroes." (p.4)

From a distributed perspective leadership "is the collective *interactions* among leaders, followers, and their situation that are paramount." (ibid p. 4) It is the practice of leadership that takes the starring role rather than a specific leader. Alma Harris (2006) reports that a distributed leadership perspective opens up the possibility that leadership is not an exclusive component of a formal role. In a school context, leadership is then not simply a function of what a principal knows and accomplishes. Rather distributed leadership challenges a more traditional notion of a singular, charismatic individual who possesses a set of traits, characteristics or skills. Leadership can instead be described as an organizational force that can be strengthened and expanded through the broad based involvement of teachers or practitioners. She further describes distributed leadership as an organizational condition that can have many configurations and is inclusive and promoted rather than mandated. It is not a delegation of leadership roles or does it mean that everyone leads. It is "a perspective on leadership [which] acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, whether or not they are formally designated or defined as leaders." (Harris, 2007, p. 13) In our small world the leadership practice was the improvement of student writing through a change in instruction and a change in the interactions among students and with the teacher. Although Laura took the lead early in our work, every member of the team took a leadership role at some point. Everyone on the team contributed equally and it was only together that we could have made the difference we made. As Fullan (2004) notes it is the interactions and relationships among people, not the people themselves that make the difference in organizational success.

Whether you call this perspective of leadership distributed or a model of leadership that encompasses practitioner leadership, it is this leadership that grew organically at our school. The continued interactions and role changes among the practitioners developed a culture of change and inquiry. We became an organization that was learning together and where a variety

of leaders stepped into the web of leadership depending on the needs of the group and the situation. Senge (1990) defined these kinds of organizations as learning organizations, which he describes as organizations in which people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire. These are organizations in which new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and where collective aspirations are set free. In learning organizations people are continually learning together. He further claims that no organization will survive today without constantly learning and changing. Hand in hand with this notion is that organizations cannot achieve this status with only one charismatic leader; they require a perspective of distributed leadership. In growing and learning organizations the role of a leader is not merely that of the superhero but rather the leader, the follower, the encourager, the promoter, to mention just a few. Today's leader must encourage and grow multiple leaders and must continually be able to take the role that is best suited to the situation. Fullan's (2003) idea that the success of a leader should be measured in how many leaders he or she has developed and left behind exemplifies this concept of leadership. This idea of multiple leaders is echoed in the business community. Mintzberg, Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at McGill University in Montreal describes the form of leadership that exists in the Fujitsu Company. "Leadership [is] in the background, being about letting as many ordinary people as possible lead." (p. 308) He refers to effective leaders as those who manage the realm of true collaboration, the shared space in which emerging relationships flourish and team members create meaning of their work,

Similar sentiments are expressed by Lambert (1998).

"When we equate the powerful concept of leadership with the behaviours of one person, we are limiting the achievement of broad-based participation by a community or a society. School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviours. It needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community." (p. 3)

At our school we developed a perspective of distributed leadership and created a sense of shared responsibility for our students and for each other. No one individual could have accomplished the same improvement for the students or the change in culture. It was the

interactions that made the difference. Our 'whole' truly became greater than the sum of the 'parts'.

The existence of practitioner or teacher leadership is dependent on the perspective of leadership held by the formal leader and the organization itself. So how do we build organizations in which a distributed perspective or practitioner leadership can flourish? What conditions are in place within the organization that create the possibility of multiple leaders and the essential interaction among them that leads to positive change and constant improvement? How do we build the leadership capacity in our organizations? In many ways simply working collaboratively on our writing project created and nurtured the conditions that led to a distributed perspective of leadership. Working together built leadership capacity in our school. Michael Fullan (2005) describes capacity building as the development of "collective ability – dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation and resources – to act together to bring about positive change" (p.4) Capacity building happens when school administrators intentionally create opportunities for teachers to work together. In his later work (2008) he comments that "capacity building entails leaders investing in the development of individual and collaborative efficacy of a whole group or system to accomplish significant improvements." (p. 13)

Linda Lambert (2003) suggests that some of the characteristics of high capacity schools include the perception that there are many skillful leaders including principal, teachers, parents and students; a shared vision; inquiry-based use of data to inform decisions; a broad involvement, collaboration and collective responsibility; and, reflective practice. Kaser and Halbert (2009) describe a Leadership Mindset that prevails in learning organizations where multiple leaders can thrive. They include a focus on deep learning, trust, moral imperative, inquiry, evidence informed decision making and the employment of a learning oriented design. Fullan (2008) supports this notion of deep learning for employees. He suggests that not only do you have to create the right working conditions the moment that employees walk through the door, "...you have to keep creating cultures of learning every day that they are on the job. If people are not learning in the specific context in which the work is being done, they are inevitably learning superficially". (p. 89) Deep learning is embedded in the culture of the workplace. Within the business community similar mindsets were identified by Mintzberg (2004), the reflective, the analytical, the worldly, the collaborative, and the action mindset. Mintzberg's mindsets

certainly fit within those presented by Kaser and Halbert. Within both is a preponderance of working together and using evidence and action to move the organization forward, while incorporating a healthy dose of reflection. Leaders within learning organizations and the organizations themselves nurture a culture in which these mindsets can prevail. As a result multiple leaders flourish and the learning connections among those leaders changes practice .

Organizations in which practitioner leadership thrive share what I would call a professional culture. Within this kind of culture there is a mutual respect among colleagues and a sense of professional trust. There is a trust that everyone is doing the best that they can and that even if things become difficult people will band together and learn what is necessary. It is also a culture in which individuals and groups are not afraid to try something new; it risk-free. There is the belief that even if something doesn't work it was worth trying because it was done for all the right reasons. There is a clear idea of values and how they align, and a collective sense of the direction to be taken. The moral purpose of the organization is shared. Above all there is transparency, no hidden agendas, and there is a commitment to be nonjudgmental. This does not mean that the difficult work is avoided; rather it is presented as fact without the stigma of judgment. Evidence is used as a source of dialogue, not as a club. It is a culture in which everyone takes ownership for what is being done and what is happening. There is no tendency to blame someone or something else. In fact there is no sense of blame, only an exploration of what and how something occurred and how it can be improved. This professional culture is also a culture of inquiry and evidence informed decision making such as described by Kaser and Halbert (2009). Questions and evidence are used to inform decisions and plans are made to continually check progress.

If the above describes what must prevail at the organizational level in order for practitioner leadership to flourish, what personal characteristics do leaders with a distributed perspective of leadership demonstrate? How do today's leaders conduct business everyday in order to create the conditions in which a distributed leadership perspective exists? According to Lambert (2003) in order to bring a distributed perspective of leadership to the job an initial analysis of what this type of leadership entails is necessary.

“Among other things, learning with, contributing to, and influencing the learning of colleagues. A leadership perspective also requires us to watch for and codify leadership behaviour: to notice, for instance, what questions are being asked (and what the effects are), what design features are suggested (and what their intended outcomes are), and what feedback is given (and what its purpose and effect is). Reflecting on these behaviours allows us to better understand what we have observed.” (p. 26)

Accordingly leaders with a distributed sense of leadership, question, watch and reflect.

Mintzberg (2004), who utilizes the terms management and leadership interchangeably refers to these new engaging managers as those closest to the craft, they

“connect to the floor; they are less inclined to deem from detached offices. They dig out impressions beyond reading facts, by listening more than talking, seeing and feeling more than sitting and figuring. They are inclined to inspire more than empower, to collaborate more than control. ...These managers do not see themselves as the allocators of resources, including those human resources, so much as the strengtheners of the bonds among human beings.” (p. 274)

These new leaders are able and willing to redistribute power and authority and are comfortable working in a collaborative culture where they are not always the decision maker. Renihan and Renihan (in Renihan, 2008) suggest that principals need to empower their staffs, giving them a share in important organizational decisions and goals. They must provide forums for staff input, act on that input and give real leadership opportunities in school-specific situations that really matter. Within this redistribution of power a leader may find him or herself in the role of follower – a role in which leaders can initially find challenging. Smith (in Renihan, 2008) describes the ‘following part of leading’ as asking questions instead of always giving the answers; as providing opportunities for others to lead ‘the formal leader’; doing real work in support of others instead of always or only the reverse; becoming a matchmaker or what Fullan (2008) calls ‘connecting peers with purpose’; and, seeking common understanding rather than consensus.

Let me summarize with a second story and the lessons I have learned about enhancing the leadership of the practitioners with whom I have worked. In my district position I was in charge of a group of highly intelligent, creative teachers whose knowledge in literacy far surpassed my

own. They had developed a formative reading assessment tool that could help teachers determine the strengths and challenges of their students from Grade one to ten. In my previous story I classified myself as a member of the collaborative learning group. We all had about the same knowledge. In this new situation it was clear to everyone that my knowledge of the teaching and learning of literacy, although considerable, at least in my own eyes, was by no means equal to theirs. My role became one of a follower. I provided the questions, ideas and support to do the work, and when necessary contributed to the production. The conversation began with reflection of the work, acknowledgment of its high quality and reflecting on how it would be used in the field, because that was where it mattered. Our questions became guides to reflection. Will teachers use the tool and how will they use it? Will teachers understand how to use the data or even know how to extract it? Will the data answer the questions that are meaningful to the teachers and the students? Once the data is there will teachers have the capacity and knowledge to help students learn? Will they have the strategies to scaffold learning? This led to several projects coming together. Various members of the team took leads on the different aspects of the projects, but at no time was it merely a division of labour. The team, including myself, met on a regular basis to review the work, to remind each other of the underlying deep purpose of the work, supporting the learning of our students and teachers, and to question and reflect. The result was not only a data management system and a series of lessons that complemented the assessment tool but the creation of a culture of practitioner leadership and a perspective of distributed leadership in which true collaboration became the way of working. We were better as a group as a result of the work we did together, as a result of the capacity we built together.

My experience over the years and the reflection on that experience has taught me many lessons around building the leadership capacity of the practitioners with whom I work. Primarily I have learned that a sense of optimism provides the impetus for learning together; a feeling that we can make a difference and better the future for our students and ourselves. I have learned the lesson of humility. There is always someone who knows more. I have learned that expertise prevails. It is essential to honour and encourage the expertise of others even if it means a sharing of power and authority. In fact I have learned the more power I gave to others the more I gained. Crowther, Ferguson and Hann (2009) refer to this as the ability to step back. I have learned that trust is achieved through transparency and genuine interactions. Being willing

to roll up your sleeves and work with others earns respect and trust. Working, learning and leading together trumps working and leading alone; it is the interactions that create the positive change. It doesn't have to be lonely at the top. In fact it can be quite crowded. Reflection is also key. Regular reflection about who we are and what we are as an organization, about what we believe and where and what we are doing is beneficial for everything and everyone in the organization. Above all a distributed perspective on leadership requires courage. We need courage to let go of some of the power and authority that is allotted with our positions as formal leaders. This does not mean the abrogation of leadership but rather constitutes a mature professional stance. (Crowther, Ferguson and Hann, 2009) It is not easy to relinquish our power as this generally means releasing some control. Without complete control, many of us feel we cannot be sure that everything is done correctly. Courage allows us to step back from having complete control of the reins and the comfort to take other roles, to 'follow' and be part of the support network when necessary. Collectively we can do it better. The continued, collaborative interactions among multiple leaders within an organization give a collective responsibility that results in a better 'whole'.

No matter what language we use, the idea of modern leadership is to move away from organizations dominated by one charismatic leader to organizations that are constantly learning and growing through the leadership of many; organizations which value leadership by contribution and where leadership is shared through expertise and shared knowledge. Leadership is the work of many, rather than the anointed few. It is achieved through a professional culture in which the learning of many, our students, our practitioners and ourselves is valued. Within this culture practitioners are provided with genuine opportunities to lead and the collaborative connections that enhance the growth and change are nurtured. It is a web of leadership dominated by collaborative, evidenced-based inquiry. The formal leaders within these professional cultures exhibit optimism, humility and courage. They are comfortable with the redistribute of power and authority and have the ability to reflect on the journey. When we accomplish this, we are on the road to achieving collective responsibility for our organizations and becoming a community of learners and leaders.

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