

ets of excellence when that excellence could be spread. She knew that stalled teams would not be able to move from “good to great” unless they confronted some hard truths about what their present instruction was missing. Mary was now part of Bonnie Able’s Instructional Cabinet. It presented a potential model she could examine for effectiveness.

Creating Model Teams

What exemplars are available to faculty? If none are available, how do we create and monitor them? Developing excellent schools requires examining the alignment of efforts to improve learning, not only horizontally at the school level, but vertically throughout the district. When the organization needs mental energy and intelligence to be pooled in order for it to function as intelligently and efficiently as possible, working groups at each level—the superintendent’s Leadership Team, the principal’s Leadership Team, and the teacher teams—must serve as strong, effective models for others. Only if the district’s or school’s Leadership Team interactions are progressive can principals or superintendents reasonably expect *all* teacher teams to evolve into accountable ones.

The principle of vertical alignment says that leaders can learn from their own experience as a member of a progressive professional community. Thoughtful principals practice certain behaviors and take away strategies from what they see in the superintendent’s instructional cabinet or at the assistant superintendent’s task force and curriculum team meetings; teachers learn the possibilities and behaviors of powerful professional collaboration from their participation on school-based Leadership Teams (LT’s) and in district-based problem-solving and planning groups. In many instances, that knowledge of how groups function to make everyone smarter finds its way into the classroom as well.

Attenuation of Implementation

Change loses strength the further it is from the initiating source. Listen to this lament from a superintendent trying to implement district instructional change with his Instructional Cabinet.

We have agreed to focus on writing across the curriculum at all grade levels. It has been my assumption that all of you have been working with your teachers so that this focused initiative reaches every classroom. In the last few weeks Margaret (the assistant superintendent) and I have conducted some implementation checks in over 50 classrooms. We estimate that only 30 percent of the teachers are working for quality implementation—the rest are complying superficially, and at least 15 teachers are ignoring it entirely. What’s going on here?

The further a change gets from the site of initiation, the weaker the implementation. Establishing effective teams that support classroom level change so powerful and significant that students feel the initiative is a challenge. Increasingly, schools are forming or trying to revitalize Instructional Leadership Teams in order to address this challenge. Forming the group is perhaps the easiest part of the effort. Next comes the task of transforming it into a collaborative and then an accountable professional community.

We asked a group of middle school principals to state their biggest struggle in building effective Leadership Teams (LT's). They noted that members have difficulty with the following:

- Assuming a “big picture” school or district perspective, i.e., balancing what is best for the school versus what is best for themselves and their colleagues.
- Abandoning the notion that they *represent* their department and that departmental agendas and personal goals should take precedence over collective goals.
- Listening and responding, i.e., communicating effectively.
- Preventing technical and logistical worries from overwhelming any possible focus on instruction.
- Holding individual LT members accountable to communicate and implement common agreements established by the School Leadership Team. Often agreements are communicated as principal mandates or ignored entirely.

Let's make this last, most frequently cited struggle, more concrete by listening to a middle school principal's response to the question: “What is your biggest struggle with your leadership team?”

I couldn't believe it: after considerable discussion, the Leadership Team (LT) had agreed to focus the next department meetings on the development of writing across the curriculum. The data were clear: the two sets of student work samples we looked at were pretty awful, and we had agreed that we had to bring the skill practice into each classroom. Before we left the meeting, we even filled in the Department Follow-up sheet we'd created so that all of us would be clear about what we had to do to follow up LT deliberations with action. When they reported back, only one team had a plan. The other teams said they had other more urgent things they were dealing with: a field trip and a discipline problem. This isn't the first time either. To be honest, I think I can easily name three or four other instances when various department leaders have not followed through. I know we're trying to decentralize decision-making, and I don't want to alienate people. What should I do?