



Seeking solutions? Start by asking (the right) questions

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Growing up, I heard many military acronyms and analogies from my uncle. Even normal routines such as planning the family reunion included terms such as “ETA” — and most importantly, the “meal task force.” Thinking of him recently, I asked my now-retired uncle how he built so many successful teams over the years. His response was, “Start with what you have and model what you want.” Although that piece of advice may sound simple, it holds true.

Following my uncle’s words of wisdom, collective leadership begins with an inventory of what expertise is already available in your building and then modeling the practices that you want.

I recently transitioned from a school district to the South Carolina Department of Education, where I have been on a headfirst deep dive into learning about and supporting the [Collective Leadership Initiative](#) (CLI). The school leadership I experienced in the past was more traditional and top down, so to see this work in action is intriguing. Currently, there are more than 25 schools engaged in the CLI. Their success stories range from teacher-designed professional learning communities to teacher-created schedules. A common starting point for CLI school teams is identifying what expertise they have and then tapping into that expertise, remembering that it *already exists* in their buildings.

Collective leadership creates opportunities to capitalize on individual strengths to support shared goals. Listening to educators provides valuable insights into the untapped expertise that is already in a school. Inviting teachers to the table may initially increase the workload, but it ultimately creates opportunities to engage teachers in tasks they’re interested in and passionate about. This can make later work more efficient and goals quicker to realize, which reduces or focuses workload.

Reflecting on my own experience in South Carolina’s schools, I would have appreciated an opportunity to engage in collective leadership. My colleagues and I could have contributed new ideas about everything from the lesson planning template to lunch procedures, but at the time those were decided by the leadership team without our input. While some decisions can only be made by the administration, there are many decisions that could benefit from the untapped expertise and perspectives from staff.



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When you begin to think about identifying people to lead something in your school, consider those that are already serving. Are you listing only a few names? Are multiple tasks assigned to the same person? If so, this is a sign that you may want to consider creating more opportunities for more people to lead and engage in collective leadership. As I reflect on my work with CLI and my own experience, I have seen that sharing influence, responsibility, and professional learning are all ways that you can start leveraging what you have and using that to model what you want to create: a collectively led environment that yields success.

Shared Influence

The concept of being an influencer is popular in today's society and has flooded social media. Influencers exist for everything from doctor-created TikToks to workout tips on Instagram. There are influencers in every school as well. These educators have a tremendous impact on initiatives. Some teachers are early adopters who are ready to bring new ideas to life, while others wait to see outcomes before buying in. Educators impact the rate of change, determining how long new initiatives will take to be implemented — or if they're implemented at all. In the spirit of starting with what you have and modeling what you want, it is imperative to identify those that have a positive influence in your building and allow them to spread their enthusiasm. CLI survey data have consistently shown that there is a strong sense of shared influence when educators are allowed to spread that enthusiasm.

As an instructional technology specialist, I witnessed many teachers welcome technology. They integrated technology into their lessons in creative and content-specific ways. I enjoyed discovering and referring facilitators for district professional development events where they could share their influence with colleagues. During one of the events shortly after the Chromebook adoption, one of the high school teachers developed a practical approach to flipped learning. She was given the opportunity to share, and she accepted the challenge. Her influence sparked other teachers, and the end result was improved student outcomes and test data. One opportunity for shared influence resulted in modeling powerful instruction across the district.

Shared Responsibility

The responsibility for a school's success extends beyond the administration team. Administrators and teachers working together to implement policies and procedures will yield more positive results than administrators working alone. Problems can be solved and questions can be answered by asking the right questions and tapping into the expertise that is already present in your school. When attempting to revise a schedule, develop new discipline policies, or support teachers, start by asking questions to surface expertise.

Extending the invitation for teachers to partner with you in the work builds efficacy. And through collaborative work structures, teachers gain skills and confidence. Our current efficacy surveys indicate that educators in CLI schools are extremely confident in their ability to influence student learning and have remained so over several years. Because of this, they actively share responsibility for student and school success.



Shared Learning

Meaningful professional learning should be at the forefront for all educators. Collective leadership fosters an environment where everyone has an opportunity to learn and grow through practice. Engaging teachers in their “zones of genius” creates space for their innate passions and personal strengths to shine and model for others in the building. The zone of genius is the intersection where natural enthusiasm and learned skills collide — and then combine in powerful ways.

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My own zone of genius is planning professional development. A few years ago, a principal extended the opportunity for me to serve as their personalized learning coach. After attending the training, I wondered how professional development would look if personalized learning strategies were implemented to scale.

I started by creating a learner profile for each teacher. The profile yielded rich information from how the teachers felt about implementing something new to how the teachers felt they learned best. Starting the process with a learner profile and adapting professional development based on their answers solidified the need to implement personalized learning for students.

The staff was more receptive after being able to identify the benefits through their experience. Thus, rather than being assigned a task, they were invited to engage in a task aligned to their zone of genius. They owned this process because it was not dictated to them; it was a “get to do” versus a “have to do.” Collectively, we shared the learning. In this way, I was able to develop personalized coaching skills while helping the teachers be more prepared to personalize student learning.

Are there opportunities that are get-to-do tasks versus mandates at your school?

Sharing influence, responsibility, and professional learning are all great individual undertakings, and collectively they align to create an environment that yields system-wide success. When responsibilities are shared, burnout is reduced because the load rests evenly upon the shoulders of the staff.

Just as our family takes inventory to line up the zone of genius with special dishes for our family reunions, inventory your staff to find the intersection between their skills and training to begin your journey toward collective leadership. Embrace and embody my uncle’s words of wisdom: “Start with what you have and model what you want.”

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