

Leading Teams of Leaders

What Helps Team Member Learning?



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A study of Connecticut leadership teams finds that they are more effective when team members, not team leaders, coach other members and when coaching focuses on accomplishing their task.

By Monica Higgins, Lissa Young, Jennie Weiner, and Steven Wlodarczyk

There is a myth in education that portrays the superintendent as a charismatic hero. Just as CEOs in business have often been seen as “charismatic saviors” of large private organizations (Khurana 2002), so, too, can we see evidence of school districts searching for charismatic saviors today. The all-powerful hero superintendent is expected to be both omniscient and

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omnipresent in the district. Furthermore, the cause for the superintendent's "effectiveness" is believed to be his or her leadership characteristics or traits — traits that can be selected for but that cannot be developed on the job.

These perceptions make it difficult for superintendents to meet these high expectations, especially when coupled with the inadequate training that many superintendents receive both prior to and on the job. Indeed, the constant turnover of superintendents may be one indicator of the mismatch between expectations and support.

Fortunately, a competing view of leadership is beginning to take hold. Scholars and practitioners are turning to a stakeholder view of leadership in which leaders must influence multiple stakeholders, including parents and community members outside traditional authority structures. This requires a dif-

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ferent kind of leadership — one based not on the model of a solo hero, but rather on the collaboration and teamwork of a senior leadership team (Hansen 2009). This shift also changes the focus of talent management because it requires identifying and *developing* leaders, as opposed to depending on leadership traits like charisma to identify, hire, and dismiss superintendents.

Districts are moving toward management by senior leadership teams, and a number of initiatives have been lauded by the Broad Foundation and others (McFadden 2009). However, in addition to its successes, this new district leadership model has created some challenges. Specifically, superintendents must now create a true team in which individuals feel genuinely engaged and committed to the work. Indeed, the extent to which individuals are learning and growing as a result of their team membership can be thought of as a key indicator of team effectiveness (Hackman 2002). Therefore, the greater team members' learning, the greater their engagement in the work and the greater the potential for sustainable reform efforts.

How do superintendents create the conditions for team member growth and learning? Research has uncovered key enabling conditions, such as designing the team's tasks to be more conducive to teamwork than individual expertise and ensuring that the work is compelling to team members

(Hackman 2002). However, less is known about how such leadership behaviors as coaching affect team effectiveness and, in particular, team member growth and learning. To examine the different kinds of leadership behaviors that superintendents can enact in their senior leadership teams, we evaluated the relationship between these leader behaviors and team member learning in 25 senior leadership teams in Connecticut districts.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY TEAMS

The senior leadership teams in this study were all led by superintendents who are members of the Superintendents' Network of the Connecticut Center for School Change, which started in 2001. In 2007, network members decided to focus much of their energy on improving senior leadership team effectiveness. As part of this effort, we gathered data on their teams in 2008.

We asked each superintendent to create a team that focused on instructional improvement strategies. Each superintendent built his or her team using that functional definition, so there was quite a bit of variance in the teams' compositions.

Studying superintendent teams in this way has its advantages and disadvantages. By focusing on teams in a single state, we can control for a number of factors associated with each district's political environment. Also, by focusing on a particular network of superintendents, all study participants could be given similar instructions simultaneously (for example, at a conference meeting). Thus, the "treatment" could be similar. One clear disadvantage to studying a single network of superintendents is the relatively small number of teams to examine. As a result, only 25 teams are in this study. However, because we're interested in team member growth and learning, which was assessed by team members themselves, our analyses were at the individual, not team, level, which allowed us to draw a reasonable sample size ($n = 226$) and to conduct multilevel modeling to investigate proposed relationships. Teams in this study ranged in size from 8 to 18.

All team members were asked to take the Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) in early 2007. This instrument assesses sociostructural features of the team, such as team composition and work design, along with team process indicators, such as the extent to which the team's strategy, effort, skills, and knowledge were used effectively (Wageman, Hackman, and Lehman 2005). In addition, the TDS asks questions about perceptions regarding the amount and type of coaching provided by the leader (superintendent) and, separately, by team members. Finally, the TDS asks questions regarding the amount of

growth and learning that members experienced, including the extent to which “working on this team stretches my personal knowledge and skills” and the extent to which “I learn a great deal from my work on this team.”

We focused specifically on the relationships between leader and team member coaching and individual team members’ growth and learning. We controlled for such sociostructural features as the extent to which the team members felt as though they were indeed working on a “real team.”

COACHING: WHAT HELPS?

There are several ways by which superintendents can help teams become effective and improve team member growth and learning. One way is to focus on task processes, which includes working with the team to develop the best possible approach to its work, keeping the team aware of things that might require a change in work strategy, helping the team identify and use member talents effectively, and building a shared sense of commitment to the work. Another way to help the team is to focus on interpersonal processes by, for example, working with the team to resolve interpersonal conflicts and to improve interpersonal relationships. Reinforcing good behavior is a third way to help team effectiveness. And a fourth way to help is by *not* engaging in certain unhelpful interventions, such as micromanaging the team. We examined all four possible intervention types but focused on the first two: task-oriented and interpersonal-oriented coaching. The tension between these two types of interventions seems to be the topic of much of the coaching debate. Indeed, the emphasis in education literature on team coaching appears to be on skills that enhance a leader’s ability to intervene to directly resolve interpersonal conflicts.

This emphasis is not unique to education. Generally, the writing on team coaching in management and organizational development tends to emphasize solving interpersonal problems, rather than redesigning, restructuring, or intervening in ways that focus first and foremost on the team’s task. Teams that experience performance problems often face interpersonal conflicts among members as well as leadership tensions that include communication difficulties. Leaving these problems unattended could derail a team or lead to process losses, such as free-riding or mindless habitual routines that could undermine team performance (Steiner 1972). Still, the assertion that the best way to tackle these issues is to intervene by working directly on interpersonal conflicts may be misinformed; root causes of team conflict often have more to do with the ways in which a team’s task is designed and how people are working on the task

than on unrelated “personality conflicts” (Hackman 1989).

Over the past decade, a growing body of research has shown that interpersonal approaches to coaching aren’t the most effective means of improving team performance. For example, social psychological research by Woolley (1998) directly juxtaposed interventions focused on the task with those focused on members’ interaction processes. She found that interventions focused on the task outperformed those focused on interpersonal processes. Similarly, the management literature has become increasingly skeptical of the idea that process consultation enhances team performance (Hackman 2002).

We investigated all four types of leader interventions: task-based process interventions, interpersonal process interventions, interventions that reinforce desired behaviors, and unhelpful interventions. Unlike previous research, we focused on one aspect of team effectiveness: team member growth and learning. This outcome is often overlooked in the literature on teams and yet may be particularly important as districts struggle to sustain reform efforts.

To read more about developing teams

Hackman, J. Richard. *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Wageman, Ruth, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, and J. Richard Hackman. *Senior Leadership Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Great*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2008.

To read more about collaboration

Hansen, Morton T. *Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Create Unity, and Reap Big Results*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2009.

To read more about helping behavior

Higgins, Monica C. “When Is Helping Helpful? Effects of Evaluation and Intervention Timing on Individual Task Performance.” *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 37, no. 3 (2001): 280–298.

Schein, Edgar H. *Helping. How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help: Understanding Effective Dynamics in One-to-One, Group, and Organizational Relationships*. San Francisco, Calif.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009.

We found that superintendent interventions that focused on improving processes associated with the team’s task were significantly related to team member growth and learning. However, interventions focused on improving interpersonal processes were not, nor were the other kinds of interventions we explored. These results held regardless of the characteristics of the district individuals came from —

large or small, majority white or nonwhite, or percent free and reduced lunch. Superintendents who coached their teams by focusing on the team's task processes were significantly more likely to have a positive effect on team member growth and learning than those who coached their teams in other ways.

COACHING: WHO HELPS?

In addition to what kind of coaching behavior enhances team member growth and learning, we examined the source of the coaching — that is, whether it was the superintendent or team members who coached the team. One of the central tenets of organizational research on teams is that team leaders should find ways to help a team help itself. That is, micromanaging the team is counterproductive. Furthermore, creating conditions that enable a team to help itself — for example, getting the right people on the team in the beginning — may be critical to how the team performs. These enabling conditions set up the team so that the work is most likely to proceed in a productive manner (Hackman 1989).

The extent to which a team leader allows the team to lead itself results in a self-managing, self-designing, or even self-governing team (Hackman 2002). In a self-managing team, the team leader sets the team's overall direction and design but leaves team members to decide how to monitor and manage the work (for example, professional service teams). In a self-designing team, the team members both monitor and manage the work and determine how the work will get done (for example, a product development team). Finally, in a self-governing team, members do everything from setting the direction, designing, and monitoring and managing the work, to execution (Hackman 2002). In any of these types of teams, team members may take on a coaching role.

Like superintendents, team members might coach on task-related processes or interpersonal issues. In the case of task-related coaching, team members might promote shared motivation and commitment, ensuring the team uses the best possible approaches to its work, and pushing the team to effectively build and use members' skills and knowledge (Wageman, Hackman, and Lehman 2005). In contrast, team members could focus on interpersonal processes to resolve problems or conflicts among team members. Team members also might engage in unhelpful interventions that negatively affect learning, for example, by telling other members what to do and how to do it.

We examined all three kinds of team member coaching. We found results that were quite similar to those we found for superintendent coaching:

Team member coaching on task-related issues was significantly and positively related to team member growth and learning, whereas coaching on interpersonal issues was not. However, unlike leader coaching, there was a significant negative relationship between team members' use of unhelpful interventions and team member learning. In other words, unhelpful interventions from a teammate, like attempting to micromanage a colleague's work, have a greater negative impact on team member learning than does similar behavior coming from the leader.

We found a surprising result: Task-related coaching by team members had more than twice the effect on member growth and learning as did superintendent coaching. Thus, coaching from within can be a major resource for superintendents as they consider various avenues to help team members develop personally and professionally on the team.

We also found a significant, negative interaction in task-related coaching when conducted by the team members compared to team leaders. When team member coaching is relatively high, growth and learning are enhanced, regardless of the level of superintendent coaching provided. In fact, when team member coaching is at the highest level, superintendent coaching makes no difference in team members' growth and learning. However, when team member coaching is relatively low, superintendent coaching can mitigate the negative effects of poor member coaching. These results suggest that for teams to produce the greatest learning and growth for team members, superintendents need to create conditions for team members to step up to the job of leadership and to coach one another.

CONCLUSION

Superintendents need to find ways to extend their spheres of influence beyond their formal positions of power. Building teams that can extend the superintendents' power base by generating effective solutions and implementing them requires a collaborative approach to leadership.

When superintendents lead district teams, they may create conditions that either facilitate or hamper team member growth and learning. One way to enhance team learning is to focus energy on the work that needs to get done, rather than managing team member interactions. This finding may fly in the face of intuition — that is, when there's an interpersonal problem, we tend to focus on the interpersonal processes involved. However, if task-related coaching includes such behaviors as ensuring that team members' skills and talents are used effectively, then focusing on the task may ameliorate interpersonal conflicts because it will increase the chance that all members will be seen as valuable resources.

That is, focusing on the team's work may have positive spillover effects for the team's interpersonal processes.

Task-related coaching is superior to interpersonal process-related coaching. In addition, coaching from within — from the team members themselves — can have a greater effect on team learning than coaching by the superintendent. Thus, it is critical for superintendents to create a team environment in which team members feel comfortable speaking up and stepping in to help — a “psychologically safe” team environment (Edmondson 1999).

Most superintendents cannot be charismatic heroes to their school systems. As a result, many districts have shifted to new models of leadership that require superintendents to think deeply about organizing and developing teams. Our research suggests that one way superintendents can best succeed in leading their teams is by coaching on the team's task-related processes and by creating the conditions that foster leadership from within. **K**

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