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Reflections on Successful Leadership Practices by a Secondary Principal Edward DeDecker

This story describes how a handful of practices in the [Ontario Leadership Framework](#) (OLF) were successfully enacted in one secondary school. Described in the author's own words, those OLF practices included "...recognizing the importance of building relationships, setting direction collaboratively with staff, creating organizational structures to focus on intentional and purposeful teaching to improve instruction and securing accountability through shared leadership and joint ownership in the direction setting for the school."

I have been an educator for 26 years, 13 of them as a secondary teacher of Science and Mathematics, among other things. My experience as a school administrator includes three years in a secondary vice-principal position, followed by more than five years as an elementary principal. At the time of writing this case, I was mid-way through my fifth year as a secondary principal.

Personally, I have a mission: "Continued self-improvement in the service of others." I believe the role of the principal (and my role within a Catholic framework), is to set the direction of the ship and to motivate staff to keep adding the fuel to propel the ship forward in the direction we have established together. I have two primary functions within the context of our Catholic Faith. One is to ensure the safety of staff and students. The second is to protect and enhance the learning environment. The Catholic School-level Leadership placemat of the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) serves as a guide to accomplish this work. This story is designed to provide readers with the opportunity to connect the journey of our school with their own and illustrates some of the ways in which I have enacted selective OLF practices.

The journey at my secondary school was really predicated on experiences as a principal in both panels (5.5 years in elementary, 4.5 in secondary). In secondary schools, there is a culture among some teachers and administrators suggesting that while curricular change (and by extension instructional leadership) may be possible and can even be demonstrated to be possible at the elementary level, it cannot be done at the secondary level because secondary schools are different. This belief creates a real challenge for secondary principals committed to instructional leadership.

As an elementary principal, I had the opportunity to begin the process of instructional leadership in a school that was identified by the Ministry as in need of additional supports. I was moved to a secondary school in January of that year but was able to

continue to monitor the staff engagement and change what was occurring from a distance through my vice-principal, who remained at the elementary school. She later moved to a smaller elementary school as principal and did a remarkable job in changing the climate and culture in a way that greatly improved student learning. Due to our previous work together and our good working relationship, I was able to see the results of her leadership within that school. What I witnessed was both remarkable and highly motivating. I believed, as a result of my elementary experiences, that the focus on Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCPs), Anchor Charts, Big Ideas and High Yield Strategies could work in a secondary school context.

I found myself in my fourth school as an administrator (third as a principal) and I understood how important it was not to arrive at a school with preconceived notions about what needs to change. The OLF states: “Leadership is the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders toward the identification and achievement of the organization’s vision and goals.” For me, the translation was arriving with a three-step plan: Honouring the Past, Discovering the Present and Growing the Future.

To honour the past, one must build relationships with staff. They need to know that you respect where they have been. This helps them to understand they are valued. There is a period during which you spend a great deal of time listening in order to understand, before you ever attempt to be understood. This is the period where you begin to build trust, an important set of practices encompassed in the Building Relationships and Developing People domains of the OLF.

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

Crucial to the trust-building process is to acknowledge and celebrate the accomplishments of individuals and teams. I tried to do that with my team by honouring the past. I demonstrated my trust by acknowledging the staff’s ability to collectively provide direction, in terms of strengths of the school community, and challenges that need to be addressed.

By doing this, my team can celebrate the past and begin the process of establishing pieces of the improvement plan for the future. At this point, it is also easy to introduce data to be reviewed in order to also establish student learning goals. By following this process, the administrative team is left with a range of “suggestions” for celebration and improvement. I use the notion of a vector to establish what my direction would look like and an angle that contains my vector to reflect the range of ideas of the staff. The next task is to utilize your experience and knowledge to align the staff’s suggestions with your ideas of where the school needs to go.

I have found that the staff’s ideas for improvement and those of the administrative team are not usually that far apart, and this helps increase ownership in “Setting Directions” for the school.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

Once there is alignment of the staff and administrative goals and they are presented back to the staff, the language becomes: “this is what you have told us we need to do as a staff.” In this way, you create ownership among the staff and “build staff members’ sense of internal accountability,” creating better buy-in to move forward on the school improvement plan as related to climate and student learning. As we discuss the plan with individual staff members who are not “on board,” I can leverage collective ownership; as opposed to saying, “I want you to do this,” I can say, “We decided as a staff we needed to work on this. How can I help you to make it happen?”

5.1 Building staff members’ sense of internal accountability

As part of the process in my school, we utilized school climate as a precursor to instructional change. Our focus was on purposeful and intentional teaching. Because our school was a “Catholic school community” with almost 50% non-Catholic students, we decided to explicate the treatment of others using the “golden rule.” This idea stems from my elementary school experience in which school mottos or mantras were used. I recall the motto for my own children’s elementary school was “Our students can and will succeed.” The principal changed the motto to, “Each of us do to the best of our ability.” I was struck by the ability of a principal to honour the history but at the same time make a change that reflected his own beliefs.

At my first school, through a process involving staff, we came up with: “You can be the difference for someone else.” At my second school, using the same process, we came up with: “Make the ordinary extraordinary, bring hope.” In each case, the plan was to use these words to bring about transformative change through a call to action. In all relationships, these words became the question/call for improved effort and behaviours ... how are you making a difference? How are you bringing hope? The phrases helped to ground staff, students and parents in a common set of aspirations when they needed help in deciding how to approach a situation.

At the secondary school, as opposed to using a motto, we developed the phrase: “Treat others the way you would like to be treated.” The question to staff was ... how do we want to be treated? Three words – kindness, respect and fairness – came to light. At first, the administrative team modeled the use of this language by displaying three questions in each office and purposefully asking students at the end of their visit, disciplinary or otherwise, three questions: Have you been treated with kindness? Have you been treated with respect? Have you been treated with fairness? The questions served as a check for understanding. The questions reinforced that this was our intention, and if that is not how they felt, the questions also allowed for deeper understanding because it opened dialogue between the administrative team and students.

1.4 Communicating the vision and goals

After a year, we printed these questions and invited staff to use them in their classroom; we also began to speak of our commitment to students and staff in this way and

introduced the expectation that this is how we would be treated as a staff by our students. I can say it has made a real difference and that we have reduced suspensions by 25% as a direct result; we were not trying to reduce them – it just began to happen. I can also point out that EVERY student can tell visitors, without hesitation, what the three most important words are in our community. Staff began to take it further and to engage students in classrooms by having them create assignments, work in groups, etc., to further explicate what kindness, respect and fairness mean to them at school.

We also noticed that the Catholic Graduate Expectations (CGEs) were being talked about at graduations and important ceremonies but suspected that few students could name any of them. We also were hesitant to put staff to the test because we had a real concern that most would not be able to name more than one or two, at best. If the CGEs were important and we expected students to attain them by graduation, didn't it make sense that students and staff should be able to name them?

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

To address this problem, we had students create a poster with student pictures and the CGEs in a large font, so that the thrust of the expectations could be seen from anywhere in the classroom. Teachers were then engaged in collaborative discussions about teachable moments using the CGEs. They would point out to the class when someone demonstrated a CGE in class, through questioning and engaging the class in a discussion about why someone had demonstrated a CGE. EVERY class has had these prominently displayed for three years now.

As teachers began to see the benefits of these consistencies in the classroom, we began to push for other consistencies. The board improvement plan called for Catholicity, Numeracy and Literacy Goals. While we were beginning to feel comfortable with the Catholicity Goals through kindness, respect, fairness and the CGEs, we had work to do in the other two areas. Literacy was accepted as being part of the work of all staff but there was nothing specific to address it in all classes. Numeracy was considered to be firmly owned by the mathematics department and no one else even attempted cross-curricular work in this area. We decided to work on numeracy and literacy by looking at our EQAO results and board data to determine where our students struggled.

For our school, literacy became synonymous with making inferences, extending understanding and critical literacy. We went to the provincial curriculum documents and were able to demonstrate consistencies in the expectations right from grade 1. These connections helped teachers to see their role in literacy. We also took a larger view of numeracy with a focus on problem solving, data collection and analysis and non-linguistic representations like graphing. Once we identified these as being part of literacy and numeracy, we were able to openly discuss how these areas were related to all subject

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

areas and, more importantly, how they were vital for a student's success beyond high school.

We extended our dialogue about intentional and purposeful teaching. To address the consistency in all classrooms, we introduced a lesson plan that laid out Catholicity, Literacy and Numeracy

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

learning goals. As a staff, we determined that if students were to achieve these learning goals, it was important for them to know the intentions, in each area, at the beginning of the lesson. In the same way we approached the CGEs, we followed through by identifying the literacy and numeracy goals at the beginning of each lesson.

We also took advantage of work done in some exemplary elementary schools and were able to take some key teachers to visit and see TLCPs, Anchor Charts and exemplary teaching in action. One of the "take-backs" included the Bump It Up Strategy, which helped us focus some attention on assessment, and from there how much work we had to do with co-construction of learning goals, success criteria and descriptive feedback. As a result of all of the above, we began to identify what a classroom should look like and included the display of student work, collaborative learning, gradual release of responsibility, three-part lessons and assessment for, as and of learning.

What are our next steps? We need to make the literacy and numeracy goals more explicit; for example, what does making inferences really look like? Can we make an Anchor Chart with students for making inferences and so on, with other numeracy and literacy goals? As well, our school highlights the notion of alignment versus coherence. On initial view, our classrooms demonstrate alignment with the board and School Improvement Plans ... there is common language that translates directly into the classroom. But on deeper examination, we are missing the coherence – the words are there but the students are slow to make the connection between the goals and what it is they need to learn for that class/lesson.

More work needs to be done on going deeper, teachers need to intentionally and purposefully link specific activities with the stated goals from the beginning of class throughout the lesson and follow up using consolidating activities to really drive home the learning. Classroom visits need to focus on the non-negotiables; what is it that we must see alive in every classroom? If these things are not present, how is the conversation respectively framed to help teachers move forward in the interest of our students?

Our journey highlights the Catholic School-level Leadership version of the OLF by recognizing the importance of building relationships, setting direction collaboratively with staff, creating organizational structures to focus on intentional and purposeful teaching to improve instruction and securing accountability through shared leadership and joint ownership in the direction setting for the school.

Final Reflections

The following words of staff members and a student help to sum up the changes that have occurred in my school over the past four years:

In my tenure here at John Paul II, I have noticed a gradual change in our community. There is a sense of belonging that has strengthened over time. "Kindness, respect and fairness" has been adopted by our staff and students as a way of life, not just words spoken to each other. (Staff Member)

In the past three years, we have made great gains in purposeful and intentional instruction. We have an inclusive environment based on kindness, respect and fairness. (Staff Member)

The change did not happen overnight. We posted the Catholic Graduate Expectations, Kindness, Respect and Fairness and adopted a new school prayer based on this theme. These things all came together, and we began to live it. Kindness, respect and fairness are now in everything we do. First it was conscious but has now become tacit. It is now part of our character. It is something that has become a part of us. (Staff Member)

Over the years I have noticed more Catholicity within our classrooms. Our assignments reflect on our Catholic religion and allow us to further express who and what we believe in. Another change over the years that I have noticed is the technological aspect. With more technology, such as projectors, it allows us to become more engaged and enjoy our work. Teachers have also made more connections with life lessons, as well as academic lessons. Over the years we have grown closer to teachers and it has helped me learn because I can interact with them in a different way! (Student)