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A Comprehensive Approach to Leadership Development

Thames Valley District School Board

Background

This is a large school district with approximately 65,000 students and 8,000 staff members. The staff is comprised of approximately 5,500 teaching staff, 275 school administrators, and 2,500 non-teaching or support staff. The support staff consists of approximately 900 educational assistants, 400 early childhood educators, and the balance being school psychologists, counsellors, therapists, management, and secretarial and custodial positions.

The district, covering a large geographic area with schools in both rural and urban locations, has experienced many challenges and 'growing pains' as the result of amalgamation in 1998, at which time it incorporated four smaller school boards to become the large board it is today. This process was a difficult one as the newly formed school district tried to value the identity, values and traditions of each board while creating its own mission and vision. There have been many challenges in bringing staff together

Characteristic Addressed By This Case: A Comprehensive Approach to Leadership Development

After an intensive review of information gathered during her entry plan meetings with representatives from all stakeholder groups, the new director of education communicated her vision of moving the system towards a 'learning organization'. This vision entailed 'flat-lining' the organization into one where all employees would share the responsibility for their own learning, as well as their students' learning, through a collaborative approach that will result in improved student achievement. School and system leaders are faced with many challenges as they seek to align their work with the vision of the new director of education.

This case study examines the journey undertaken to develop and support leadership practices, for those new to their school - based leadership roles, as well as revamping a system staff development program for all employee groups with an interest in exploring both lateral and hierarchical leadership roles that support becoming a learning organization.

State of Leadership Development at the Beginning of the Journey

At the time this case study was written, the district was experiencing declining enrolment at the secondary level, which had been offset with a small rise in

elementary enrolment in the past two years. There have been a significant number of retirements in teaching staff in recent years. There have also been a significant number of retirements of formal leaders: principals, vice-principals and superintendents. As a result, this has put pressure on the Human Resources Department, and specifically system staff development, to recruit and train school and system leaders as well as develop a 'pool' of aspiring leaders.

In the past, experienced school administrators were part of a mentoring program that saw each new school administrator with a one to one mentor who supported the new leader, as well as being linked to a small network to help foster discussion and cross-pollination of ideas throughout the district. Now with over 45 new administrators, the individual coaching model needed to be reviewed and adapted to meet two expectations: refining leadership capacity building to meet the needs of a large group of new leaders as well as align with the system's movement towards a more distributed approach to leadership. This meant taking a look at the existing two-year mentoring program and engaging the participation of experienced school leaders to construct a coaching and networking model that would support the new administrators as well as provide coherence with the system's new direction.

Similar situations were also occurring on the support staff side of the organization, where succession-planning analysis confirmed the need to review the system's ability to fill leadership roles with successful candidates from within the organization. Data made the reality quite clear: within the next 5 to 7 years, many of the experienced leaders in the support staff would be eligible to retire, and this would create a loss of both experience and ability to continue to support the system in an effective manner.

Support staff had once been part of the leadership development program, but over the years, the participants shifted to being only from the academic side of the organization. We returned to the more inclusive approach to leadership development. This provided the System Staff Development Department with the opportunity to meet two needs: 1) provide an opportunity for aspiring leaders across all employee groups to explore leadership in a more collaborative manner; and 2) build relationships that would support the demanding work of leading a large organization where all skill sets are valued and respected.

Steps Taken to Improve the Condition of This Characteristic

The 2013-14 year was one of observation, and collecting information from the participants of the new administrator monthly sessions for those in the first year of their role as vice principal or principal. Sources of information included: exit cards from the sessions, ongoing conversations with Ontario Principals Council (OPC) representatives and senior administration, and feedback from the director of education. In the short term, the System Staff Development Department was able to begin changing some of the components of the new administrator sessions to reflect the needs outlined by the participants while communicating these to senior

administration. This became part of the “learning agenda” at the senior administration level, and precipitated ongoing conversations on how to meet the needs of the new administrators in the long term. The focal question for the staff development department became “How do we support our new school leaders in their first two years in the role so that they are successful and feel a valuable part of a vibrant school system? “

To help with the long-term leadership development of new administrators, a group of experienced administrators began the process of examining their own leadership practice through a review of their Emotional Quotient (EQ.) With the support of Ontario Principals Council (OPC), LNS, and the Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS), they engaged in a two-day session that reviewed overall values, beliefs and understandings of their own leadership practice. This review was anchored in a cognitive coaching model, facilitated by OPC, which resulted in the group being able to establish guiding principles and a tentative framework to support the new administrators for the 2014-15 school year. This same group is now leading the mentoring of administrators in their second year in the role.

At the same time, the System Staff Development Department was also conducting focus groups with all employee groups, including union leaders, on how best to engage aspiring leaders in a journey of self-discovery to understand their perspectives on leadership, and how they could be effective lateral and hierarchical leaders within the district. The resulting conversations helped formulate a vision for the System Staff Development Department: all employees in a learning organization will have accessibility to an environment in which they can maximize their leadership potential, to maximize their own practice and improve the overall system’s ability to increase student achievement.

In the long term, this vision will mean that the system can have a cadre of lateral leaders who understand their own leadership practices, and can be drawn upon to self-identify and be invited to consider a formal role within the district on either the academic side or support side of the organization.

Some unexpected events accompanied this review and re-visioning process including involvement of experienced school administrators and their renewed passion for helping their new colleagues through a more responsive process of mentoring. This process also included the opportunity to have critical friends, from OPC and BLDS help stay focused on guiding principles, and to network with other leadership building efforts at a provincial level. As well, access was provided to various other resources to support the development of professional learning experiences in the area of leadership practices anchored in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) while at the same time creating opportunities for differentiation, based on each participant’s most current leadership need.

This connection included the use of technology to help with the networking of mentors and new administrators in between face-to-face large and small group sessions.

As mentioned earlier, there were minimal leadership building opportunities for employee groups on the support staff side of the organization, and a leadership pathway program is beginning in November of 2014, which included both leadership exploration, leadership development, and personal EQ analysis.

Over 125 employees representing all employee groups are currently registered for the initial roll out of this program. With the participation of existing support staff leaders, the System Staff Development Department has been connecting with post-secondary community partners to explore possible knowledge-building opportunities as identified by the participants and system leaders (e.g. educational assistant placements supported at the system level through identified leaders; early childhood educator mentoring program for new hires).

Significant Turning Points

The active participation and commitment of the group of current school leaders was a significant development. These leaders helped to identify the key components of successful school leadership in light of the Director's emphasis on respecting the individual's strengths. In a previous environment such decisions had been top down, more hierarchically driven; this current approach has empowered experienced school administrators to review their own leadership practices while helping build the leadership capacity of their new colleagues. It is now also more focused on the key components of the OLF, and how this framework can be a resource beyond being taken out only as one aspect of the performance appraisal process.

We are moving towards a process that supports, questions, and allows reflection to formulate next best steps in practice as opposed to providing only directions, or set solutions. There is a more organic approach of learning to lead, in which all members of the group are equal contributors to discovering effective leadership practices that will have an impact on their relationships with classroom educators. By feeling more comfortable and understanding the complex nature of leading, as it pertains to impacting instructional practices, all leaders involved are benefiting from "aha" moments. There is more respect of individuals' backgrounds and what they bring to the role, as opposed to seeing them as "empty vessels".

The leadership pathway program is currently beginning to take form as system support staff leaders are asked to identify and encourage individuals who demonstrate effective practice and leadership potential. This will help create a more ground-up engagement of individuals interested in leadership, be it lateral or hierarchical.

Where We Are Now

The new administrators have met and will continue to meet in a variety of sessions, based on a combination of system-focused areas and their own needs as communicated through their feedback at each session. Each session is led by experienced school leaders, and is anchored in a specific domain of the OLF. There is also an intentional focus on reviewing their EQ reflections, which were part of the promotional practices of the district and how now, that they are in the role of school administrator, they are connecting the importance of professional leadership resources to their work of leading effectively.

There is now a process for providing authentic lateral leadership roles for support staff (e.g. educational assistants training new colleagues to build capacity in their designated role). This is now being planned for early childhood educators. Succession planning with support staff has begun to identify functional and leadership capabilities that will inform future components of the leadership pathway program for support staff while also informing the construction of a support staff leadership framework.

Advice For Others, From Our Ongoing Learning

As we continue to feel more comfortable with the fluidity of how the work of leading needs to be learned, nurtured, developed, reflected upon and assessed in an ongoing basis to meet the ever-changing realities of a learning organization, we suggest the following:

- Establish communication processes that move up, down, horizontally and vertically so that all involved have both a voice and the best possible system information available at that particular point in time; over communicate!
- Ensure that system parameters are well defined and communicated so that formal and informal leaders can co-construct the learning agenda to support effective leadership practices by all employees
- Engage in ongoing discussion with all stakeholders to ensure consistency of expectations and outcomes for leadership development; this includes the unions so that a positive and supportive stance will be evident and help promote the development of all possible leaders that aligns with the vision, and mission of the district
- Provide a structured process to record the voice of all employees to help inform professional development and learning opportunities so that the learning remains connected to both the needs of the participants and the district
- Anticipate and plan for funding to support engagement of participants
- Include a variety of employee group leaders in guiding and facilitating leadership learning activities so the learning is seen as respecting the learning of all employee groups

- Provide opportunities to train existing informal and formal leaders across the system to refine their skill sets in their specific area of expertise as well as facilitation, mentoring and coaching