

A Guide for Teacher-Powered Site Administrators

*Collaborative Leadership
for Thriving Teams*

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Topic 3: *Building Leadership Capacity on the Team*

Most teacher prep programs do not train teachers to be leaders or to work collaboratively with their colleagues, yet these are vital skills at a teacher-powered school. Successful teacher-powered teams invest in themselves and help everyone to view themselves as a leader. A teacher-powered administrator leads this type of leadership capacity-building at their school both in terms of mindset and in terms of specific skills needed for certain autonomies (for example, if your team has hiring autonomy, there are personnel laws your team might need to know). View the autonomies online at www.teacherpowered.org/inventory/autonomies.



Reflection Questions for Individuals

1. In your role as principal or administrator, what are some specific ways you build leadership capacity in your team?

2. What skills do you look for when encouraging people to take on leadership positions?

3. What has been helpful in developing your own leadership skills?



Team Conversation Starters

1. What does your team look for when hiring new team members in terms of their leadership skills?
2. How does your team evaluate a potential candidate's collaboration skills?
3. How has your team prepared for leadership transitions (either the principal role, or perhaps leadership team, committee chairs, or department leads)?
4. What are some leadership opportunities that your team can create for members of your team?



Common Challenges

The most common challenges in building leadership capacity on your team are really around **mindset and time**. Sound familiar? These two are consistent challenges in each topic.

Some teachers are natural leaders, and this shines through in all their work. For others, getting teachers to see themselves as leaders is a challenge. Many are used to traditional systems where the principal makes decisions and tells them what to do, and, even for those who want to use shared decision-making structures, when things get hard the easiest path is to revert back to what they know—traditional hierarchy. Knowing each member of your staff well will help you know just the approach to get them to embrace leadership positions. Some need to be asked, others will gladly take on responsibility when an opportunity arises, while others need to be encouraged (even pushed) into leadership. Having everyone take a leadership style survey is helpful for you as the site administrator and for teachers to know that there are many ways to lead at a teacher-powered school.

Time is always a challenge. Buffy sums it up perfectly: “There’s not enough of it to do all the things we want to do, to do all the collaborating and partnering and feedback-giving that we know is best for students and adults. It’s hard to give up anything; it all matters!”

Teachers are busy, all the time, and while some seasons are more crazy than others, regularly scheduled team time is vital for all successful teacher-powered teams. Creating space for important conversations, skill-building, and team work is difficult when there are so many urgent needs at a school each day. **Finding the balance between having teachers take on leadership and decision-making and over-extending teachers is an ever-changing task that requires a lot of navigating from the team and the site administration.** As Jeff says, “When you ask teachers to contribute to and run programs, we also need to make sure we are giving them the time and resources to do so; anything from having their copies made for them to having a sub day available for collaboration.”



Tips and Tricks

Hire Well

- “Hiring is definitely the most important thing,” says Buffy. When asked what is the most important autonomy for teams to have, most teacher-powered practitioners point to **hiring autonomy as being critical to their success**. If you are going to run the school with your colleagues, you need team members who are not only excellent teachers, but work well with others, can add to the larger school culture, and want to take on leadership roles in the future.
- You need more than someone with good teaching skills; new hires must **share values and vision** of the team. “You can help someone with pure teaching strategies, but you can’t change their values,” writes Jeff.
- **Collaborative mindset matters**. Letitia agrees: “Having a strong, aligned, collaborative teacher is paramount, in whom leadership can be cultivated, as opposed to having a strong leader who is perhaps not highly collaborative and/or a strong practitioner.”

“Regularly switching up different leadership roles has helped us to create well-rounded leaders. For example, our staff meeting is facilitated by a different person each month and we all have agreements to present at conferences or host visitors.”

Ayla Gavins

Pair veterans with newer team members

- **Partnering up with a team member** allows both people to grow, one as a mentor, and the other with new skills. “As far as building capacity, it’s important to make sure that all projects are carried out collaboratively between people with experience in the task and people with less experience. For example, the teacher who has been running our college trips since the school opened works with two newer teachers so that they can see how the trip is executed. This also means that the new teachers have to be trusted with carrying out some of the tasks and be included in the discussion of the others,” shares Jeff.

Rotate positions

- Rotating who leads each staff meeting, alternating who is the designee at district meetings, and **having a cycle for leadership positions** allows all team members to not only learn new skills, but to have a broader perspective on what goes into running the school. Ayla says, “Regularly switching up different leadership roles has helped us to create well-rounded leaders. For example, our staff meeting is facilitated by a different person each month and we all have agreements to present at conferences or host visitors.”
- Letitia says, “A teacher voice leading a discussion, initiative, presentation, etc. holds a different weight than me doing so. Teachers need to see themselves as leaders; helping to push them further into leadership roles helps to distinguish that I am but one leader amongst several leaders, with all of our voices having value and influence.” **When teachers see their peers leading** it reinforces that teachers are leaders and encourages others to step up.

Designate Time for Developing Leadership Skills

- Teams must have time together outside of their classrooms and outside the regular work day. **Annual or semi-annual retreats** allow everyone space to look at the bigger issues and provide time to process the conversations. “We’ve spent time reading, discussing and defining what shared leadership means and what it looks like for us; this is something we revisit annually at our governing school council retreat as we re-calibrate where we are and how we’re wanting to grow year to year,” shares Letitia.
- Several teacher-powered schools also encourage **all teachers to get their administrative credentials**. This helps ensure that there are several people in the building who are qualified to do things that require an administrative credential such as evaluations. Teachers not only learn valuable leadership skills, they increase the leadership capacity of their team without having to leave their classrooms.

Create a Culture that Values Collaborative Leadership and Individual Needs

- All team members need to **embrace the collaborative leadership culture** at the school. From before they are hired, through the onboarding process, to their own professional learning year after year, leadership should be a commonly discussed topic. Alissa writes, “By requiring all teachers to serve in a leadership capacity on a regular basis, it has become an expected part of our overall culture, so when there are changes and transitions, the procedures and protocols we have developed remain. Each teacher chooses a leadership skill to develop as part of their professional development plan each school year.”
- Encourage everyone to **name their limitations**. Everyone has different limitations due to life circumstances, life stages, and personal choices. Saying what these are upfront allows people to adjust expectations and create structures and processes that work for all team members. Ayla shares, “As part of our expectations for working together, in our handbook it says that you should name your limitations. If limitations are made clear we can partner up and work as a team in ways that are helpful and will allow us to still reach our goal even though we all contribute differently. When we know what our team members are able to contribute that helps the rest of us pick up where needed.”

Prepare for Leadership Changes

- Leadership changes are one of the most challenging events for teacher-powered schools. Adjusting to this innovative model, learning each person's leadership style, and building trust with the team is hard. **Having a succession plan** is an essential part of successfully navigating this change. Ayla says, "At the winter staff retreat I asked if anyone was interested in taking on a larger leadership role such as my position. Three years ago I told our staff that I was ready to make a transition and that we would spend the next five years preparing ourselves for that transition. Next year two teachers that are interested will be working closely with me to broaden their scope of leadership within the school. This will really be helpful as a bridge when I leave the position."
- Irene at Chrysalis successfully took over from the school's founders after **a year of overlap**: "When I came on as administrator, I overlapped for a year with the prior administrator and school founder. The teachers had made the choice (using budget autonomy) that paying for two admins in that first learning year was a worthwhile investment. I sure felt supported and learned a ton that year, especially since I came from outside the charter world and was not a teacher within the school first." While this isn't feasible for many schools, even a month of overlap is helpful for those that can make it work.

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