A group of high school educators were being interviewed about the extensive changes their school had made as part of their school improvement efforts. The mood was celebratory because the changes had resulted in significant increases in student achievement. Then the question was asked, “What would happen if the principal left?” After a long silence, a veteran teacher replied, “Well, I guess we’d have to teach the new person how we do things around here now.”

The days are long gone when the principal is the font of all knowledge and the sole decisionmaker of a school. Today’s effective school leaders recognize the power of collaboration and that collective wisdom, not top-down decision making, leads to sustainable improvements. Although a typical tenure for a principal might be 3–5 years, teachers may work in a building for 20–30 years, giving them a sense of the history and culture of a school that has developed over time. Change that is initiated and supported by teachers can often be nurtured and maintained by those same teachers despite multiple turnovers in administration.

Cultivating teacher leadership is necessary if schools are to create a positive, effective, long-lasting transformation. When teachers are fully engaged in designing school improvement efforts and take ownership of the initiatives, they are much more likely to commit to the success of the process and allow the time needed for significant, sustained change to occur. Reeves (2008) reported the results of a recent research study that examined the impact of teacher leadership, saying, “Teachers not only exert significant influence on the performance of students, but they also influence the performance of other teachers and school leaders.” So what distinguishes a teacher leader and how can principals recognize, develop, and capitalize on the teacher leadership present in a school?

Recognizing Teacher Leaders
Some teachers are perfectly happy adopting the position of “I’ll just close my door and teach,” but this attitude is not found in teacher leaders. Although teacher leaders come in all shapes and sizes, some characteristics are consistently found in these individuals. Most obvious is their ability and willingness to work with a variety of their peers. They are natural collaborators; the
doors to their classrooms are always open, and many of their colleagues seek their advice and expertise.

Teacher leaders are effective communicators who recognize the importance of building consensus and mobilizing people around a common cause. Likewise they know the value of creating “buy-in” among stakeholders to create and sustain commitment. These teachers understand that improving students’ academic performance is the responsibility of all. They are results-oriented people who realize that school improvement takes hard work, time, reflection, and revision. Because they have the respect of their colleagues, teacher leaders have tremendous influence when it comes to changing the practices of others and building support for growth and change initiatives.

When working with their colleagues, teacher leaders use many of the skills that they use with students. Data and evidence inform their decisions, and they readily share information with their peers. Just as they monitor the progress of their students, they carefully evaluate the effectiveness of new initiatives and programs and make adjustments along the way to maintain momentum. Teacher leaders keep the best interests of the students at the heart of every decision and are the leading advocates for the actions that positively affect students the most. They value student voice and understand that truly effective instruction occurs by focusing on what the students are learning, not what the teachers are teaching.

Teacher leaders are optimistic and are rarely the negative squawkers who complain in the teachers’ lounge. They are open-minded and courageous risk-takers who are willing to accept the challenges that come their way. They are flexible and creative individuals who are persistent and passionate. In short, they lead by example.

Nurturing Potential

Leadership potential exists within every staff member. A teacher who readily shares his or her opinions and quickly volunteers for committee work might have great potential to become a teacher leader, but so could the quiet teacher who spends much of his or her time in the classroom. The key is discovering which teachers have the most positive influence on the instructional practices of their colleagues. When in doubt, ask teachers to tell you who is a good resource when they need help with their lessons, who works well with others and commands their respect, who is not afraid to stand up for what he or she believes, and who is
viewed as an effective teacher who always keeps the needs of students in the forefront.

To capitalize on teacher leadership, a principal must be confident enough in his or her leadership abilities to let go of being the one in control. Developing teacher leaders among staff members requires that principals nurture, nudge, and encourage teachers to step outside of the classroom and share their expertise with their peers. Such a principal develops a school culture where sharing effective instructional practices is the norm, not the exception, and is totally committed to the success of all students who are entrusted to the care of the school.

A wise principal must also be aware of potential pitfalls along the road to developing teacher leadership and seek ways to navigate around them. This can be especially true for new principals if the school culture has not valued teacher leadership in the past. Possible obstacles include teachers’ unwillingness to assume leadership roles, contracts that limit additional responsibilities, false assumptions, professional jealousy, concerns about teacher leaders spending time away from classrooms, and a history of lack of opportunity or encouragement to develop leadership skills. But despite the challenges, developing a culture that supports teacher leadership can result in significant payoffs in student achievement. Following are some suggestions to get you started.

Principals can:

- Send teachers to conferences and seminars to further their knowledge. When they return, ask them to share the ideas and strategies they learned.
- Build regular opportunities into the schedule for teachers to meet together to discuss instructional strategies.
- Provide accessible, up-to-date data in a manageable format.
- Role model a passion for personal professional development and collaboration.
- Build their own support networks by joining professional organizations and meeting with colleagues to share successes and discuss concerns.
- Meet regularly with teacher leaders, such as team leaders, department heads, curriculum committees, and school improvement teams.
- View all teachers as having leadership potential; build an atmosphere that expects and supports leadership.
- Create as many opportunities for leadership as possible. Some may be paid positions with significant responsibilities; others may be heading up a committee that lasts only a few weeks.
I didn't set out to be a principal. As early as first grade I had made up my mind that I was going to be a teacher, and that was all I ever wanted to be. Looking back, I can't quite put my finger on what specifically started me down the road to the principalship, but I do know it grew out of teacher leadership opportunities that came my way.

When I began my career, the concept of teacher leadership just wasn't part of the conversation. Teachers pretty much did the teaching and principals did the decision making. Although teachers certainly recognized and sought advice and support from their colleagues, there was no concerted effort to develop leadership among teachers. Leadership teams, site councils, and school improvement committees were rare. The first time a principal asked a few of us to help screen applications for a new hire, it was such a deviation from the norm that we were asked to keep it a secret. After all, teachers were not supposed to be given access to application files!

Opportunities for teacher leadership grew as the times changed and collaboration began to be introduced into the culture: sharing strategies at a staff meeting, heading up school and district committees, serving on the board of local and state organizations, teaching instructional skills classes in the district, and more. Somewhere along the line, the idea of becoming an administrator was born—initially, out of the encouragement of others, rather than an internal desire of my own. I loved teaching and wasn't absolutely sure I would be effective as an administrator, but I eventually realized that I wanted to have a wider influence on the practices and culture of a school than I could have from the classroom.

The roles of both principal and teacher have changed dramatically during the years I have been in education. The principal can no longer be the decision-making center of the school, and teachers can no longer close their doors and teach. I was fortunate to have worked with colleagues who saw my potential, gave me the necessary support, and provided me with the opportunities to develop my leadership skills.

Allow teachers who are interested in pursuing administration to substitute for a dean or an assistant principal when needed. Principals can encourage their teachers to:

- Actively seek out leadership opportunities in the school and the district
- Volunteer for committees and task forces
- Become team, grade-level, or department leaders
- Mentor new teachers
- Implement and coordinate professional development for their team, grade level, department, or school, such as book studies, data sessions, and collaborative planning opportunities
- Present at local, state, or national conferences
- Pursue opportunities to be involved in curriculum development
- Learn more about educational policy at the state and national level and become an advocate
- Network with colleagues outside the school and district
- Participate in e-mail discussion groups
- Join advisory boards and professional organizations
- Regularly engage in professional reading.

Collaborative Leadership

Principals have the responsibility to lead collaboratively and to acknowledge and capitalize on the leadership skills of their teachers. Collaborative leadership and professional learning communities is one of the three core areas that compose the framework for school improvement (NASSP, 2004). The National Middle School Association (2003) identified “courageous, collaborative leadership” as one of the characteristics of a successful school for young adolescents. Because collaboration is a key ingredient to long-lasting school improvement, school leaders must support the development of teacher leadership among their staff members. In the words of Ken Blanchard, “Leadership is not something you do to people, but something you do with people.”

REFERENCES


Theresa Hinkle (theresa.hinkle@yahoo.com) recently retired after teaching middle school in Greensboro, NC, for more than 30 years and is now an educational consultant. She is the current president of the National Middle School Association.

Patti Kinney (kinneyp@principals.org) is the principal of the NASSP National Center for Middle Level Leadership.