

Taking the Lead: Promoting Professional Development

How do education leaders, including school business officials, ensure that their staff members are always learning?

By Paul A. S. O'Malley, Ed.D.



Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher said, “Being in power is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren’t.” Leadership is not defined by your job title, by the amount of power you have, or by how much knowledge you possess. Rather, according to leadership expert John C. Maxwell (1998), leadership is determined in large part by the power to influence others.

Maxwell cites several elements that define successful, influential leadership:

- **Character.** True leaders have strong character and integrity.
- **Relationships.** Leaders have followers, and they develop followers by nurturing relationships.
- **Knowledge.** Leaders know their vision and promote unity in that vision.
- **Intuition.** Leaders recognize and influence intangibles, such as energy, morale, timing, and momentum.
- **Experience.** Leaders draw from the past so they are better able and prepared to influence the future.
- **Ability.** Leaders instill in their followers an assurance that they will be led to success.

Leaders also recognize the importance of professional development for themselves and for those whom they lead. Professional development is like a financial investment: it compounds. When you continually invest in your own professional development and the professional development of your team, you see growth over time. When you recognize the need for personal and professional growth and begin pursuing these skills for yourself and others in the district, exciting things begin to happen. But how do education leaders, including school business officials, ensure that their staff members are always learning?

Leading Professional Development

A first step in leading any professional development initiative is to align the goals of the professional development with the school board’s objectives. In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, Maxwell (1998, p. 40) offers a PLAN AHEAD strategy:

- Predetermine a course of action.
- Lay out your goals.
- Adjust your priorities.
- Notify key personnel.
- Allow time for acceptance.
- Head into action.

- Expect problems.
- Always point to the successes.
- Daily review your plan.

Setting the tone for the district's direction is also important. Create continuity and clarity of message and provide an opportunity for staff to share in district-level and building-level initiatives.

A professional book study is one strategy that invites administrative staff to embed their learning into their daily work. A book study is carried out over time, with regular meetings. It promotes critical thinking and intentional dialogue. Participants have time to read and reflect on their learning and then use what they have learned in their day-to-day activities.

Prioritizing goals is imperative in implementing professional development and sustaining momentum.

Because a professional book study can add to your staff's workload, the topic must be relevant and the content engaging—something your team looks forward to. Professional book studies must give staff members the opportunity to share their ideas and visions while promoting collegiality and professionalism.

For example, our district superintendent implemented a professional book study using *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* to engage administrative staff in critical reading, intentional dialogue, and job-embedded learning. He chose this book for several reasons: (1) the content is engaging, (2) the book includes examples that staff can relate to, and (3) the book has supplemental materials that can provide additional professional development.

Staying the Course

Prioritizing goals is imperative in implementing professional development and sustaining momentum. Prioritizing requires forethought in recognizing what is important and how it relates to the vision of the administration. Maxwell outlines the process required to prioritize goals by using the three Rs: requirement, return, and reward. In this example, professional development must become a *requirement*. Administrative staff members will be more engaged if the requirement provides a *return* on their investment. So it is important for the leader to choose an investment that will return

Leading toward Success

Successful leaders

- Accept responsibility for their success.
- Are passionate, committed, and dedicated to the vision.
- Ensure that their team members' personal goals align with the overall goals of the district.
- Speak to team members personally to better understand what is important to them.
- Meet with the team on a continual basis, individually and collaboratively, to ensure that the members are staying the course.
- Ensure that the team understands what is required to achieve the greatest return with the greatest reward.

the greatest *reward*. When the investment compounds, the return *is* the reward.

Consider implementing Common Core State Standards, for example—which might dramatically shift the way teachers teach. Professional development that gives administrative staff the knowledge and skills to work with teaching staff through this institutional change will benefit the entire district. Cultural shifts require cultural foundations that start with common language and a clear message and provide the impetus for courageous conversations about the issues and concerns to advance the initiative.

Continued Improvement

Providing leadership that promotes professional development is important. In his article “In Praise of Top-Down Leadership,” former superintendent Rick DuFour (2007) shares that leaders are “much more effective when they engage staff in learning together, building shared knowledge. It is clear that people are more committed to a decision if they were engaged in the process that led to the decision.”

References

- DuFour, R. 2007. In praise of top-down leadership. *School Administrator* 10 (64): 38–42.
- Maxwell, J. C. 1998. *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

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