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Trust and good communication starts with good leadership

While there may be no “I” in TEAM, the truth is that effective leadership is a big part of what makes a team successful and ensures that your audience will hear and believe what you say. Knowing how to motivate, support and encourage your staff is a big part of what separates a good leader from a bad one, and that depends a lot on your leadership style... or styles!

Good leaders have more than one leadership style in their toolkit. There are times when decisions need to be made by committee, and there are times when the decision needs to be made by you and you alone. Part of being a good leader is learning which opportunity calls for each response.

Laissez-faire, aka “Just leave it on my desk”

A laissez-faire leader doesn’t supervise employees directly or provide regular feedback. While this may appear to be avoiding leadership altogether, it can actually be a very useful technique when people you are leading are highly experienced. It can also be helpful when you are assessing your staff. A new superintendent in a school district might choose to employ this leadership style at first, in order not to step on toes while learning the skills and abilities of highly experienced staff.

This leadership style isn’t for everyone, though. It depends on a crew of self-starters, and not every employee falls into that category.

Autocratic, or top-down leadership

Making decisions alone without the input of others is the defining characteristic of the autocratic leadership style. While no one challenges the decisions of autocratic leaders, that shouldn’t lead one to believe this style is more effective. But its association with some famous dictatorships also shouldn’t lead you to avoid it completely. An autocratic leadership style can be beneficial for employees who require close supervision, or who have yet to learn all the ins and outs of their positions while still being required to perform at a high level.

This style can also be necessary when coming into a leadership role that was previously occupied by an autocrat. Your employees may be out of practice with volunteering their opinions and making decisions on their own, needing you to step in with more authority. The key is moderation. Left unchecked, an autocratic leader can prompt high turnover and low morale, destroying a school from within. When a leader consistently chooses their own advice over the advice of others, it kills creative problem solving and team cohesiveness.

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Participative leadership

Participative leadership values the input of team members and staff, while the responsibility of making the final decision rests with the leader. Participative leadership boosts employee morale because employees make contributions to the decision-making process. It causes them to feel as if their opinions matter.

When a district needs to make changes within the organization, the participative leadership style helps employees accept changes easily because they play a role in the process. ***This is important for new leadership to note, because one of the biggest leadership mistakes is choosing autocracy as the best way to quickly make big changes.*** Instituting big changes without community support is a great way to see those changes fail, costing not only time but relationship capital, making the next changes even more difficult.

The weak spot with the participative model is when decisions need to be made in a short time frame. However, if you have a finely developed participative leadership style, you will earn the trust of your employees, making infrequent autocratic decisions more acceptable at face value.

Transactional leadership

This can be a good technique to use in concert with the participatory style. Once everyone agrees on a goal, and the steps that need to be taken to achieve it, rewards can be set into place for participation. This is especially helpful if the goal that was agreed on through a participative process was not as enthusiastically supported as the administration might like. Adding a transactional step to it can help to “sweeten the pot.”

For example, the district decides to make a big push to increase reading skills, which means each school needs to make a push for kids to read more at home. Seventy percent of the teachers were on board — the rest of them like the idea in theory but are already chafing from having to factor recent additional state requirements into their already overtaxed schedule.

In this case, the school principal might choose to add a transactional aspect to the new challenge: The class that reads the most books gets a pizza party! Or, in a worldwide pandemic, a Zoom dance party! The party reward takes some of the pressure off the teachers by creating an additional incentive for the students.

Transformational, i.e. “Let’s put it all together” leadership

Transformational leadership is about change. In this style, a leader works with subordinates to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of a group.

Transformational leaders focus on the big picture within an organization and delegate smaller tasks to the team to accomplish goals. This style of leadership is the most demanding of its leaders — you have to be in constant communication with staff, aware of the district’s goals and each employee’s personal career goals as well, and where exactly your staff is in the strategic plan. That’s a lot to remember!

An administrator who wants to make a big transformation needs to gather input on the problem and potential solutions via the **participative** style. When employees have the skills and the resources and show they are on-track, the administrator can use the **laissez-faire** style of leadership with those staff members, giving them a chance to focus more attention on employees that need more support, possibly with a more **autocratic** style.

When the participative process results in goals that not everyone is on board with, a **transactional** leadership style can help push the team over the line into success.

What about cultivating new leaders?

The more people you have who are dreaming the same dreams you have, and attempting to achieve the same goals, the more effective your own leadership can be. While everyone is a potential leader, there are certain people, and certain occasions, when people are primed for leadership growth.

New staff. When a new staff member joins your administration, they are uniquely positioned to take on your goals as their own. An orientation is the best way to get your new employee or volunteer on board quickly. If new people are left to sink or swim when they first begin, you have a recipe for a resentful staff. People want to feel like they are doing a good job and fitting in with expectations. If leadership is seen as what is expected of them, and they are properly oriented towards the goals of the district and their department, they will rise to the occasion.

Currently frustrated staff. People equally primed for leadership are those who are most unhappy with their current situation. A teacher who has begged for new textbooks to no avail will be honored to be invited to be on the research committee for new curriculum, in addition to being a great asset to that group. While you may be hesitant to attempt to bring aboard your biggest detractors, they are an overlooked resource that can become your greatest allies.

As a leader, you set the tone. Your attitude trickles down. If you seek out the best opportunities for your team, your schools, and your students, that attitude will rub off on your staff, creating a positive environment for everyone they meet.

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