Reflective Leadership:
Continue to Bring Your Best

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What is leadership? What are the best leadership characteristics and/or styles? Whether you visit your local bookstore or just use a search engine, you can find a variety of books and articles on leadership and leadership styles. Whether preparing for an interview, creating a presentation, or just thinking about the next steps for success, searches on leadership characteristics will provide a plethora of terms and ideas.

Jimmy Casas discusses having the biggest impact educators can make for students in *Culturize*. Developing a culture that highlights human traits like empathy, kindness, and honesty is necessary for long-term success for our students and must be part of our daily work. Reflective practices and activities are the most powerful skills and tools to provide yourself and your team. Self-reflection and peer reflection are imperative to ensure you are making a big impact for your students. We have found that you can impact your schools through deliberate and intentional reflective practices.

The underlying condition necessary for self-reflective leadership is intellectual humility. We suggest humility not for moral virtue, but because meaningful reflection can't take place until the leader is willing to acknowledge that their ideas and actions may be flawed or incomplete. Further, as David Stroh wrote in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, "Reflective leaders must explore or acknowledge the concept that they themselves may be contributing to the problem trying to be solved." One example is the leader who vents in frustration about inflexible staff members who are unwilling to embrace change, but fails to see that it is his own approach to the change process that may be causing the resistance.

In her groundbreaking work, *Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think*, researcher Tasha Eurich defines self-awareness as "the ability to see ourselves clearly, to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world." Research shows that self-awareness is crucial for strong leadership, but as we move up the leadership ladder, we become less, not more, self-aware, due to the fact that leaders in positions of greater power are less likely to get authentic feedback about shortcomings and more likely to believe in their own prowess.

To combat this concept, leaders can cultivate self-awareness by exploring and identifying their own triggers, biases, and mental models. Emotional triggers are recurring events or concepts that cause a strong emotional reaction. Although we all have them, we rarely recognize them for what they are, and they cause us to act in sub-

optimal ways that lead to suboptimal outcomes without realizing they are at work. For example, when I (Bryan) worked as an assistant principal in charge of discipline, I was triggered by the suggestion that the consequence I meted out to a student was not significant enough. I became defensive, implying that the staff member didn't sufficiently care about the student. In retrospect, I was triggered by my own insecurities about the effectiveness of the school discipline program I was running, but failing to recognize that it affected the quality of the relationships and trust of my staff. It takes time to identify these triggers, but once identified we can recognize and stop them before we go down unproductive paths.

Almost all of us believe we are more rational and reasonable than others. In reality, we are all subject to any number of cognitive biases that distort our thinking and decision-making processes. One of the most common is the confirmation bias — the tendency to prioritize information that supports what we already believe. We're especially susceptible to this in certain situations such as classroom observations, where there may be thousands of potential "data points" but the observer picks which to record and focus on. If we come with a preconceived notion that a teacher is weak in questioning, we are more likely to focus on the weak questions.

A third key to cultivating self-awareness is recognizing the impact of our mental models. At times we become accustomed to something being a certain way, we often begin to unconsciously think this is the way it should or must be. When we see something done in a way that conflicts with our mental model (for example, a teacher who prioritizes shared texts and eschews self-selected independent reading in ELA, or vice versa), it is easier to negatively evaluate the practice than to challenge our own mental model. This also rears its head in hiring; when we create an idea of what, for example, a kindergarten teacher should be like, we may miss out on a candidate who is actually superior but doesn't fit our preconceived image.

There are a host of tools and

processes that self-reflective leaders can use to improve outcomes. Among our favorites is the concept of a "premortem." Prior to any undertaking, you consider the following: imagine that we are sitting here x amount of days/months from now, and this undertaking has failed — what went wrong? Generating "plausible reasons for the project's failure" is an excellent way to surface potentially faulty assumptions or weak strategies (Klein).

Another effective tool is called "deliberate perspective taking." When we find ourselves in disagreements with supervisors or colleagues, it's easy to discount others' ideas. In perspective taking, we write or discuss from the other party's perspective to better understand their motives, which are rarely as simple as we might make them out to be. In doing so, we see our own actions from their perspective, which can lead to either a change in the result we're looking for or a change in the approach to obtain it (Eurich).

Self-reflection, when done with honesty, integrity, and humility, will improve your practice personally and professionally. Peer reflection is an equally relevant practice to be done regularly. Peer reflection is best when engaging and reflecting with your professional learning network, and reflecting with colleagues within your professional learning community.

If you've ever had the opportunity to sit with Todd Whitaker, you've heard him discuss the power of Twitter and its ability to connect individuals. Twitter has provided educators a tool to connect and collaborate across classrooms, buildings, districts, and states with efficiency and simplicity. According to a 2016 study, the top professional uses of Twitter were resource sharing (96 percent), collaboration (84 percent), networking (77 percent), Twitter chats (74 percent), and even emotional support (22 percent) (Krutka and Carpenter). Prior to Twitter, collaborating and networking with colleagues across your region, state, or country would only happen at conferences. More and more people are turning to Twitter for a low-cost alternative to professional development (Caron).

Building your PLN to improve the

efforts and achievement within your PLC will be accelerated by online tools. Our PLNs push us to stay connected and perpetually reflect. Our PLN has led us to connecting and collaborating across districts. A simple gathering of people wanting to read the same book led to a Voxer book club. This book club has since evolved into the #Read2Lead Voxer book club, which has led to #Read2Lead Twitter chats.

Reflecting within your PLCs engages local stakeholders and faculty in the reflection process. Reflection brings teams together, teams gain insights about each other, and teams create better cohesiveness (Moore). Reflection practices help build greater direction for teams, create a greater sense of belonging, and improve the work of both the team and the individuals on that team (Nobel). We have found face-to-face reflection and survey/form reflection to be constructive. We have utilized surveys and questionnaires to assess and respond to a variety of things affecting our schools. Soliciting feedback is just as important as responding to the feedback received. Responses to reflections must be thought out and should never be reactionary. The best types of responses are those developed in collaboration. Teams that are representative of your organization, built on trust, have participants that are willing to put differences aside, and are not afraid to disagree with each other are most successful. As Helen Keller said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Teams that are built on trust, accept responsibility, invest in each other, and are willing to challenge the status quo are the teams that will stay together and achieve great things. Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves define business capital and profes-sional capital. They argue that teams must be comprised of strong individuals who do not fall into group thinking. Professional capital is made of human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Teams that represent the various stakeholders within your community will help you provide human and social capital, but the leaders who are willing to turn over decisional capital to their teams will have the most effective teams.

When building or redeveloping your teams, it is important to have a reflective understanding of yourself. Self-reflection will help you understand the limits that your own conscious and unconscious bias, professional expertise, and background create. If a team comprises a group of individuals who look, sound, and act like you, the team is more likely to keep status quo and will hinder credibility and decisions the team makes. Teams that are made up of varying stakeholders from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds are teams that will be the most reflective and will keep all members accountable to the shared vision of your organization.

Reflection is a necessary component of any great classroom. The collective efficacy that focuses on meaningful reflection will lead to far better results. Baruti Kafele speaks about the importance of leadership and often proposes the question, Is my classroom, school, district a better place because I lead it? This implies that the most effective tool for growth and achievement is a mirror for self and peer reflection. Use your team and mirror to help keep you on track and to realign your priorities when your reflections tell you it is necessary.

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