



Flying Kites

The Principal's Leadership Role in a Professional Learning Community

By Thomas Many, Ed.D. and Sam Ritchie

What kind of principal will be most effective in leading the vibrant, collaborative culture that is so essential to a Professional Learning Community? Is a school better served by a strong principal who leads by the sheer force of his or her personality or by a nurturing and facilitative principal who guides the work of others? The answer is that Professional Learning Communities need their leaders to possess both qualities and require principals who have mastered the concept of loose-tight leadership.

How can a principal have a leadership style that is both loose and tight? In a Professional Learning Community, a critical attribute of highly effective leaders is an understanding of when to hold tight and when to loosen one's hold. DuFour and Eaker describe this concept of loose-tight leadership as an "interesting paradox" and argue "the ability of the principal to foster widespread leadership in a Professional Learning Community initiative plays a major role in determining whether or not the initiative is sustained." No question, the principal's role in a learning community is complex. In many ways, it can be compared to flying a kite....

Imagine a beautiful spring day. The blue sky is dotted with white puffy clouds drifting along the horizon. The eager kite flyer runs across the field, pulling along a fragile conglomeration of sticks and tissue at the end of a string.

For a time, the kite bounces along the ground and shows no inclination of ever getting off the ground. Eventually, and after much effort, the kite flyer manages to lift the kite a few precious feet into the air, but danger suddenly looms. The kite seems to possess a will to dive toward electrical lines and tangle itself in tree limbs.

It is a defining moment for the kite flyer. Will the dangers keep the kite from soaring skyward to attain its ultimate height? The kite flyer adjusts tension on the string to redirect the kite and catch a puff of wind that lifts it upward. As the kite floats aloft, the kite flyer loosens the tight control and lets the string play out, enjoying the wonder of the kite soaring higher and higher.

Efforts to get a kite aloft can be likened to a school's journey toward becoming a Professional Learning Community. Teachers are asked to collaborate in what are often

unfamiliar ways. Relationships on newly established teams are fragile. It may seem that those involved simply "bounce along," showing no inclination to work together to meet common goals and get the initiative "off the ground." Early efforts to get underway seem fraught with setbacks and obstacles to overcome. It is critical during this period that a principal understand when to retain tight control and when the success of the initiative depends upon loosening that control, giving the teams a chance to take off and soar.

There are times when a principal must be direct, set clear objectives, establish specific timelines and create expectations for collaborative teams. In holding tightly in such circumstances, the principal is allowing the learning community in their school to "fill with the wind" in order to soar. Likewise, there are times when principals need to give faculty time to work and encourage them to make decisions about what students should learn, how common assessments are developed and what interventions to put in place for students who don't learn. This is the time for the principal to "loosen up" and give the collaborative teams more responsibility. It takes both understanding and a considerable amount of energy to get the idea of a Professional Learning Community "off the ground," but the right combination of loose-tight leadership will bring it about.

Another way for principals to think about the concept of loose-tight leadership is to reflect on 'why' teachers are engaged a particular activity. If a question appears to be related to 'why' then the issue is likely something for the principal to retain tight control in addressing. However, if the issue is best described by 'how' or 'what' then resolution of the problem likely falls within the responsibility of the collaborative teams. According to DuFour, the answer to 'why' is found within the big ideas of Professional Learning Communities.

The first big idea of a Professional Learning Community is that the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. The school is focused on learning — as opposed to teaching — and the reason the school was built was not to give students a place to be taught, but rather to provide them with a place to ensure that they learn.

Second, teachers and principals cannot ensure that all stu-



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dents learn unless they work together collaboratively, therefore, the team structure will be the fundamental building block of the school. Teams will be organized around curricular expertise and assignment and will devote time to discussing the three fundamental questions of learning. The following three questions become the guiding compass for the work of collaborative teams:

- What should students be able to know and do as a result of this class, course or grade level?
- How will we know if they have learned?
- What will we do if they are not successful?

Third, each teacher, each team, and the school in general will assess the impact of their collective efforts on the basis of tangible results. The staff will commit to identifying and monitoring multiple indicators of student achievement and will develop systems of intervention that give students extra time and support when they experience difficulty in learning.

The ‘why’ questions are non-negotiable; they represent the “must haves” in a Professional Learning Community. In fact, it is the very presence of these big ideas that separates a Professional Learning Community from traditional schools. When faced with questions related to these big ideas, principals are most effective when they consistently hold tight to ‘why’ an activity is important while leaving responsibility for the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of implementation to collaborative teams.

Examples of when a principal should exercise a loose style of leadership would be determining how collaborative teams operate or what should be included on common assessments or how a system on intervention might work. The teams themselves are most capable of creating team norms and goals. Likewise, identifying what should be included on the common assessments, how the data is analyzed, or how to implement the pyramid of intervention are all questions that require the curricular expertise of classroom teachers. In a Professional Learning Community, the answers to these ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions are best left to the discretion of collaborative teams.

DuFour and Eaker describe the dynamic of loose-tight leadership by saying that “on one hand and at the same time, while they are encouraging autonomy and discretion, princi-

pals must insist on adherence to certain tenets that are essential to the Professional Learning Community concept and make it clear that teacher autonomy does not extend to disregarding those tenets.”

Louis, Kruse and Marks found that, “Principals in schools with strong Professional Learning Communities delegated authority, developed collaborative decision-making processes, and stepped back from being the central problem solver. Instead, they turned to the Professional Communities for critical decisions.”

Author David Straus concurs, saying simply, “If you have built alignment on the important issues of vision, mission, values and strategies, you should be able to trust others to make good decisions.”

Given that so much information is available about the power of Professional Learning Communities, why is it that some principals and schools succeed in creating a viable Professional Learning Community while others fall short? Learning communities will not thrive or even survive without the right kind of leadership from the building principal and work with dozens of schools has provided ample opportunity to see the loose-tight concept in action. Analyzing of the behavior of principals from two fictional high schools is useful in illustrating the concept.

For three years, Eastside High School and Westside High School worked on the concept of Professional Learning Communities. Similar in size, demographics and resources, the two high schools had very dedicated staff that expressed a desire to improve and supported the concept of Professional Learning Communities. Yet, the journey has been far more successful in one school than the other. What has made the difference?

In the beginning, neither faculty was knowledgeable about the concept of Professional Learning Communities. As a result, the first year for both schools was primarily one of learning. Both schools identified a guiding coalition of teacher leaders whom the faculties as a whole depended on to build common understandings and create a pool of shared knowledge. Staff from both schools attended workshops, sponsored book studies and worked with outside consultants to learn as much as they could about Professional Learning Communities.



At the close of the first year, both schools were in very similar places. The faculties had become knowledgeable about the structures and vocabulary of Professional Learning Communities and the majority of teachers supported the concept. Both schools were committed to curricular-based collaborative teams and established weekly team meeting times scheduled to begin the following year. In addition, teachers in both schools were looking at consistent curriculum and starting to develop common assessments.

Both principals began the following school year by establishing clear expectations for the staff, identifying deadlines for specific products, and creating expectations for using the resources allocated to support collaborative teams. Both schools set out to accomplish the same tasks by the end of the school year: 1) establish collaborative teams; 2) identify an agreed-upon curriculum; and 3) create common assessments. Both schools had experienced very similar beginnings, but from that point forward the process of becoming a Professional Learning Community evolved very differently in the two schools.

At Eastside High School, the principal was the focus of the process to build shared knowledge among the faculty and staff. The Eastside faculty looked on the learning communities initiative as being directed by the principal. In contrast, at Westside High School the focus was on the guiding coalition of teacher leaders building shared knowledge. The Westside faculty regarded learning communities as a staff-directed initiative that enjoyed strong support from the principal.

As teams began to meet, the principal of Eastside High School articulated just how the teams were to accomplish their work at each meeting, delineating exacting specifications for each team's progress, pace and priorities. No time was set aside to create norms, set team goals or create any trust between members. The schedule for the entire year was meticulously established. To further ensure that he would continue in a central role, Eastside's principal required that detailed minutes be given to him following each meeting and that copies of all documents (curriculum frameworks, common assessments, and so on) be forwarded to him for his review.

Adopting a different approach, the principal of Westside High School spelled out the specifics expected from the teams by the end of the first semester and insisted that each team begin its work by establishing a written set of team norms and results-oriented goals. Confident that the expectations for what needed to be completed had been clearly communicated to all, he allowed the teams to schedule their tasks, set their priorities, and progress at their own pace. Westside's principal also asked that each team establish a notebook and retain copies of all the materials they generated to create an archive for future use.

Although both schools were making progress, teachers at Eastside did not feel they were in control of the initiative. While Eastside teachers were struggling to complete the assigned projects and finding it difficult to work as collaborative teams, Westside teachers were feeling empowered and even

energized by the process. In fact, for many at Eastside the only way to meet the principal's expectations was to assign the various tasks to individuals and submit the finished projects for his consideration. Instead of working as a team, they were functioning as an ad hoc committee charged with the task of finishing the principal's assignment.

Teachers at Eastside were told there were no funds to purchase a technology solution for obtaining assessment data, so their discussion would rely on their intuition regarding what students had learned. Student progress and what to do for those students not meeting expectations were issues that were hardly addressed. In short, teachers at Eastside High were too busy meeting deadlines and generating materials to turn in to the principal to feel that they were making decisions to affect students' learning.

Meanwhile, at Westside the faculty was focused on learning, teams were working on an agreed-upon curriculum and common assessments by course, and everyone was looking at the assessment data (without the aid of technology) to guide their instruction. Teachers at Westside were feeling positive about the progress they had made and the fact that they had managed to accomplish nearly every one of the goals established at the beginning of the semester.

Further, teachers at Westside recognized that they were making significant decisions that would result in increased student success: collaborative teams were developing common assessments by course, implementing an intervention plan developed by a teacher committee, and piloting a technology solution for the collection and dissemination of assessment data to enhance their discussions. Taking a shared responsibility for the learning of all students, Westside teachers were deeply committed to planning a systematic, schoolwide response to implement when students were not learning.

Although the journey continued at both schools, Professional Learning Communities at Eastside were viewed as just another administrative initiative that eventually degenerated into a massive "To Do" list without ownership or enthusiasm. In contrast, at Westside, high levels of professional collaboration became the norm — the "way we do business" — and the teachers' level of commitment toward student success continued to grow.

So, what accounts for the difference in results? In a word, leadership. The principal at Eastside focused on controlling the 'what' and 'how.' He was the center of attention of the initiative and even though he understood the structures commonly present in a learning community, he failed to effectively exercise a loose-tight style of leadership and stifled the development of collaborative teams. In effect, the Eastside principal clung tightly to the kite string, controlling it to the very end, even when the kite — and his initiative — failed to soar.

In contrast, the principal of Westside High led by example, was in the midst of the process and stayed focused on promoting and protecting the big ideas of Professional Learning



Communities. He created opportunities for shared leadership, focused on consistently communicating the ‘why’ of Professional Learning Communities, and provided time and support for the collaborative teams. The principal at Westside High had learned when to exercise tight control (when setting clear expectations) and when it was appropriate to loosen leadership control (by allowing the collaborative teams to work).

In essence, the difference in implementation stemmed from the principal’s understanding of the concept of loose-tight leadership. The Eastside principal could not (or would not) relinquish tight control and ended up stifling the development of a learning community in his school. The Westside principal recognized that loosening his control or “increasing the play in the kite string” would yield the high levels of professional collaboration that characterize a Professional Learning Community. He recognized what requires his time and attention and what should be left to the teams to decide.

It is precisely the moment when you experience the sensation of flying the kite that best illustrates the dynamic tension a principal feels around the paradox of loose-tight leadership. Principals in Professional Learning Communities understand

the difference between loose and tight leadership and the ability to exert just the right amount of each is what fosters the collaboration that is the hallmark of a dynamic and soaring Professional Learning Community.

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child is actively engaged and cooperatively interacting with classmates. A variety of group and individual activities are available to ensure that every child’s playing style is satisfied. The layout of the play area is conducive to proper supervision and is frequently screened for safety issues such as large holes or protruding rocks. The physical activity expert on your campus, the physical educator, helps incorporate PE TEKS-based activities and helps with playground games and issues.

The New Recess Model: Structured vs. Unstructured Recess

There is a difference between structured and unstructured recess, both are very beneficial. Unstructured recess play is when students are free to choose their own activities. In structured recess, the students and teachers are involved in the same activity at the same time with the same goals and purpose.

In the New Recess unstructured model, the teacher guides the students in the creation of guidelines for unstructured play as students may need guidance to insure safe and active recess play. Depending on the age of the class, the teacher and students can practice and role play recess situations like choosing teams, sharing equipment, waiting in line and conflict resolutions. The students can generate rules for the class to follow and create a classroom council for peer discussions when rules are broken. Students can practice writing “How To” paragraphs when creating recess games or activities that include rules. The teacher and students can agree on procedures for recess including how to ask permission to leave for the

bathroom or water fountain, how to pass out equipment, which signal to use for lining up, and what consequences are attached for non-compliance. The older students can role play the recess rules on how to play safely to the younger students. The rules and guidelines can be shown on the morning announcements using technology to display the ideas for the students to review and discuss.

The New Recess structured model allows the teachers and students to work together towards a common goal, generally with a TEKS-based activity attached. For example, the fourth grade class studying Texas history may choose to form a walking club called “Walk Across Texas.” The teachers and students create and measure a walking path around the school. Then they establish guidelines such as, one lap around the track equals five miles. Each student can work at his/her own pace as they walk, jog or run around the track, but the daily tally is the sum of all laps around the track that day completed by all of the students. Using a Texas map, the students plot the path of this exciting journey across our state. As the journey unfolds, the students can research each area of Texas as they arrive there, finding facts about the land formations, native plants and animals, large cities and natural resources.

Another example of a New Recess structured model is a pen pal program to practice writing and language skills. The class adopts another class from another school in the same city, for

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