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## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

### Harness the Power of Teacher Leadership

The secret to dramatic school improvement is hiding in plain sight. It is right there, in the classroom, in the hallway, on your campus. According to Katz and Moeller, “Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership that can be a catalyst for school improvement.” Effective principals can harness the positive power of teacher leadership by creating a guiding coalition in their schools.

#### Key Considerations When Establishing a Guiding Coalition

A guiding coalition is a small group of six to eight influential teachers who serves as the school’s primary working and planning group. Members of the guiding coalition promote the accomplishment of school goals by helping to secure agreement, support and commitment from the other members of the faculty. They facilitate the learning of critical skills, acquire the necessary resources and commit to changing the school’s culture in positive ways. When done well, members of the guiding coalition create a sense of optimistic certainty about the success of their school.

Membership of the guiding coalition reflects a mix of both formal and informal leaders; individuals who are committed to the long-term success of the school and have the power, status, influence and willingness to lead. John Kotter recommends a guiding coalition be

made up of individuals from every corner of the school, each with their own unique set of skills, experiences and perspectives. He argues that having diverse membership allows the guiding coalition to 1) see all sides of an issue, 2) enables the most innovative ideas to emerge, and 3) provides the kind of credibility that is so crucial to the success of school improvement efforts.

There are many ways to identify the membership of a guiding coalition and while there is no one right way, there are several that simply do not work. Some schools make the mistake of setting up a rotation so that ‘everyone has a turn.’ In these schools, principals want to avoid offending anyone or being perceived as ‘playing favorites.’ Other schools allow teachers, based on seniority, to ‘bid’ for spots on the guiding coalition. Using this approach, principals offer the opportunity to the most senior member of a team or department first. If the most senior member declines, the process continues until someone accepts. Choosing the members of a guiding coalition based on a rotation or by seniority is ineffective. So, too, is determining membership by asking for volunteers or selecting the members based on a vote or peer nominations. These strategies may appear to be logical but they fail to ensure a guiding coalition has the degree of diversity it needs to be successful.

When considering which teachers to choose for the guiding coalition, Heather Clifton encourages principals to ask the faculty two questions. The first question is, “If you wanted to make a change in your *classroom*, who would you go to for help?” The second is “If you wanted to make a change in



your school, who would you go to for help?” How teachers answer these questions provides insight into which teachers would be the best choices for the school’s guiding coalition. Unlike the previous methods, Clifton’s approach uses feedback from the faculty to inform her decision-making.

Forming an effective guiding coalition begins with identifying the school’s formal and informal leaders however, a coalition’s membership is simply too important to leave to chance or the whimsy of any one individual; it must be a conscious, intentional, and purposeful decision based on what is best for the school. Principals must choose the right teachers for the right reasons in order to ensure the guiding coalition is effective.

As critical as the membership of a guiding coalition is to its success, it is equally important to maintain an appropriate balance of those with experience and those with a fresh perspective. Kotter suggests staggered and overlapping membership terms as one way to maintain this important balance. He urges principals to “recharge and refresh the guiding coalition” every year by revisiting and reestablishing the roles and responsibilities of the team. Bringing on new members generates renewed energy and enthusiasm for the work. It also provides people who want to make a difference with an opportunity to be a part of the process.

An essential task is ensuring the transition of membership goes smoothly from one year to the next. Cindy Harrison offers principals some practical advice for structuring the membership terms of a guiding coalition. She suggests that the membership remain intact for the first two years of a principal’s tenure but as the guiding coalition matures, one third of leadership team should turn over every year. This approach ensures the guiding coalition remains

open to new ideas, continues to build capacity and promotes the sharing of best practice.

Once the membership of the guiding coalition has been established, teachers begin the important work of inspiring progress towards school goals. In a study funded by the MetLife Foundation, researchers found in schools where the guiding coalition was effective, principals believed in shared leadership and worked to provide leadership opportunities for teachers. Likewise, teachers in those same schools confirmed their principals supported the idea of shared leadership and increasingly involved teachers in a variety of roles once thought to be the sole province of administrators.

Guiding coalitions in these schools met regularly with, and reviewed the work of, individual grade level and/or departmental teams. Teacher leaders participated in the review of school and team level assessment data, examined work products generated by the teams, and heard progress reports from the team members themselves. The members of the guiding coalition were instrumental in helping other teachers “embrace goals, understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning, and work together towards improvement.” (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003)

### **Harness the Power of Teacher Leadership**

Schools without effective guiding coalitions may make progress for a while but eventually, the initiative stalls, cynicism grows and resistance stops progress. According to Kotter, “A strong guiding coalition is always needed—one with the right composition, level of trust, and shared objective.” Effective principals recognize the powerful potential of positive teacher leadership and establish a guiding coalition to accelerate the school improvement process in their schools. ■

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