Leaders Modeling Professional Learning

I recently had the opportunity to engage in several conversations and to record a podcast with Chad Dumas, the author of Let's Put the C in PLC: A Practical Guide for School Leaders. Chad's website has a post view on Ten Elements of Principal Knowledge – 2-Page Overview of 10 Elements. I invited Chad to share one of these elements in a guest blog. I suggest that all his comments concerning principals also apply to instructional coaches and other teacher leaders. Thank you, Chad.

What's Good for the Goose…

"What's good for the goose is good for the gander." This saying is many times used to reference gender roles, but occasionally addresses the idea that if it's good for one then it's good for all. As in, if it's good for you to do something, then it must of necessity be good for me, too.

And so it is with professional learning: if it's good for teaching staff (and classified staff), it's good for administrative staff. Indeed, in order to create a collaborative environment for teachers, school leaders must engage in professional learning. This learning boils down to two big areas and many specific activities:

1. One’s default mode of operation, and
2. Distinguishing between leadership and management.

A Default Mode

Schools are full of challenges: scheduling, student behavior, instructional improvement, parent engagement, interpersonal challenges…the list goes on. Leaders of schools that are creating collaborative environments approach these challenges with a learning mindset. They avoid pure problem-solving, solution-driven, “fix-it” approaches. Instead, collaborative leaders approach their work with active listening skills and a learning mode.

We all have default modes. This is what we fall back on when times get tough and stress is high. Leaders who are creating collaborative environments strive to have their default mode be that of learning. When times are tough, they ask how they can personally improve—as well as how they can improve the system. When stress is high, they consider possibilities. Their default mode is that of “What can I (or do I need to) learn?”

Contrast this mode with one of finger-pointing, blaming, or short-term solution-seeking. I remember hearing that Deming (@DemingInstitute) would remark that in Japan (where he worked to help the Japanese car industry become the best in the world, for the best price) they ask “What happened?” Whereas in the U.S. we ask, “Who needs to be fired?”

The story of Warren Buffet, the multi-billionaire investor known as the “Oracle of Omaha,” comes to mind: A staff member had made some bad trades and lost a significant sum of money (possibly in the millions). Buffet had this person come to his office, and the individual was sure he would be fired. In anticipation, this staff member offered his resignation. Buffet responded with a laugh and said, “I just invested a million dollars in your learning—why would I fire you now?!” A

default mode of learning leads to collaboration and long-term success. Ask not, “who’s to blame,” but, “what can we learn from this.”

For a nice (and short!) article with excellent advice, see: @bellehalpern.

Leadership vs. Management

The second key idea around modeling learning with your staff is that of distinguishing between leadership and management. Deming noted that leadership is meeting the needs of everyone. Management, on the other hand, is about meeting the unique individual needs of each person. Another way to say it is that leadership is working on the system; management is working in the system. School leaders who are modeling learning distinguish between these two types of activities, and then act accordingly—varying their personal and organizational learning needs depending on the issue.

Specific Activities

Having a default mode of learning and distinguishing between leadership and management is well and good, but what about day-to-day, practical activities? In short, school leaders must engage in practices similar to teachers, but with their own colleagues. This includes:

- Learning alongside “your” staff.
- Learning from and with a mentor.
- Planning together with others in similar roles about

professional issues.
- Thinking together with others in similar roles.
- Observing and responding to teaching with others in similar roles.
- Observing and responding to assessment with others in similar roles.
- Focusing on improving instruction with others in similar roles.
- Using protocols (step-by-step procedures for teams) with others in similar roles.

Don’t just talk about professional learning. Do the professional learning. As you engage, especially focused on learning by doing—virtually and/or in-person—you will become a better and better leader. Because you are learning, and what’s good for others is good for us.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is my default mode of operation? How do I know? What steps can I take to make sure that learning is my default?
2. Think about the work that you do in a week. Which would you consider leadership (meeting the needs of everyone)? Which would be more managerial (meeting individual needs)? What changes might help your work?
3. In which of the activities listed do you regularly engage? What steps might you take to increase these?

Meet the Author:

With over two decades of successful educational leadership experience in a variety of roles, Dr. Chad Dumas has led significant improvements for both students and staff. He recently published the Amazon best-selling book, Let's Put the C in PLC, filled with research, stories, hands-on tools, useful knowledge, and practical skills. Learn more at NextLearningSolutions.com or follow him on Twitter @ChadDumas.

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