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Phyllis E. Superfisky O.S.F.

Stephanie M. Flynn

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Gareth Diaz Zehrbach is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

NINE LESSONS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAMS: DISTILLING A DECADE OF INNOVATION

BILL MCKEEVER & THE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY, WESTED, 2003.

Reviewed by Phyllis E. Superfisky, O.S.F., and Stephanie M. Flynn, S.S.J.

INTRODUCTION

Nine key lessons regarding school leadership teams are presented and discussed in this book in four chapters in the following broad categories: focusing work, building teams, developing leadership, and creating support. Practical information is provided along with useful case studies. The book details lessons that have been gleaned from the experience and programs of the California School Leadership Academy. The author successfully delineates each lesson by providing a detailed context after succinctly stating the lesson and introducing it “at a glance.” Each chapter is introduced by a directional quote and is summarized to provide a clear sense of direction for the reader. This book is a manageable guide for school leaders and teacher leaders.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Accountability and helping every child achieve are concepts very much in the forefront of our societal mind today. Successful schools are vying to remain so and schools suffering from low achievement are scrambling to find ways to improve. The lessons in this book have been derived from the experience of the California School Leadership Academy and document its attempts to answer this need of today’s schools.

Successful school leadership teams begin by focusing on continuous

improvement of student achievement. The teams implement the Continuous Improvement Planning Process developed by the California School Leadership Academy to focus on achievement goals. This circular process involves examining readiness of the school culture and environment, analyzing the data, setting achievement goals, implementing action plans, assessment of progress, feedback, celebration, and recalibration. The process is continuous.

The second lesson is to create a supportive school culture through focusing on student achievement. Successful school achievement programs have a positive impact on the school culture. Sometimes schools attempt to improve student achievement by improving the environment or school spirit. Elements of the school culture are used to explain lack of school progress. This model postulates that positively affecting student achievement will enhance the whole school. This program helps teachers to concentrate on achievement goals, thereby changing the school culture. The team works on developing a supportive and professional school community that works well together for the benefit of the students.

Building commitment and a team focus before beginning the work of the team is the third lesson. It is of great importance that stakeholders in the educational process understand the process and are committed to it before the process begins. The school staff must decide on whether or not to commit to this process. Time spent on this understanding is time well spent.

Choosing the members of the School Leadership team carefully is the focus of lesson number four. Respected teachers, the principal, and possibly parents and students may be team members. The size of the team and the process of team selection will reflect the needs of the individual school. Good team members are those who have vision and inner strength. Team members must be able to work well in groups and ideally represent different viewpoints. A district liaison is an important team member.

The School Leadership Team best develops into a working team by engaging in the real work of the team, as stated in lesson number five. It is not necessary to spend time teaching the group how to work as a team. As they focus on student achievement they will become a team.

Team members spend time learning the leadership skills and processes. They develop "from learners to learners-as-leaders" (p. 61). This lesson basically outlines many of the services offered by the California Leadership Academy. The process of leadership development may take years. Team members are helped to become leaders in their respective schools. Teams need support and instruction to grow and be successful.

The seventh lesson describes the role of the principal. The commitment of the principal to the process is absolutely essential. The principal's primary role is to help the team members develop a shared vision. Then the task lies

in creating “structural tension.” This arises when the team members (and/or faculty) see differences in where they want to be and where they are. The principal is also called upon to facilitate the leadership of the team. The principal must trust the work of the team. The California School Leadership Academy also provides support for the principal.

Although the leadership and support of the principal are crucial to the process, teacher leadership must also be facilitated and developed. This is the eighth lesson. Team members regularly meet with groups of teachers to develop and improve instructional practice.

The final lesson is that district support for the process is essential. The district can provide support through policy, assignments, finances, and providing data.

Nine Lessons of Successful Leadership Teams details practical guidelines to use in the development of school leadership teams. Much of the information is thought provoking and well supported. The lessons provide a framework that could be useful to a school faculty wishing to embark on this process. This book may serve as a springboard for school leadership teams. While the overall model discussed is clearly for public education and the examples speak of district implementation, private school leaders and Catholic educators will make applications quite easily for their respective sectors.

The lessons are clear, succinct, and timely. School leaders will find this book a helpful resource in plotting the course for successful leadership teams. This book can serve as a useful guide for anyone aspiring, in the author’s words, to lead “toward a shared vision from a shared reality” (p. 72).

Phyllis E. Superfisky, O.S.F., is an associate professor of education, and Stephanie M. Flynn, S.S.J., is a doctoral student at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida.