

# It Takes a Village: The Impact of Distributive Leadership on Climate and Culture

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## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

I was appointed Principal of Stinesville Elementary School in November 2014. My appointment was abrupt due to some ongoing concerns with the previous administrator. I inherited a divided staff and community tied to the previous administrator. Under previous administration, I have learned that there were few, if any, opportunities for teacher leadership in the building. During my first faculty meeting, the staff sat, listened, and did not speak. Later, I learned that this was how faculty meetings had run for the previous 20+ years. The building principal was seen as the gatekeeper - anything and everything not only went through him, but came from him. The staff was conditioned to do what they were told, when they were told. Formal teacher leadership was nonexistent. In addition to this group of veteran teachers, I have hired multiple positions across the building. We are a small school - eight general education classrooms. Years of experience fall into two categories: >25 years or < 3 years. Both groups expect to hear what to do and how to do it. Slowly during the 2015-2016 school year, I worked to “flip” our staff meetings. I started to find ways to put my teachers in leadership roles when it came to presenting SPED, CLASS, PIE, etc. Going into the 2016-2017 school year, I believed it was time to expand on this to empower teachers across the building to take on more leadership roles to allow for this to be “our” school instead of “the principal’s” school.

## **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered what would the impact be of distributive leadership on the climate and culture of Stinesville Elementary School?

Subquestions:

- What are some different ways I have distributed leadership already?
- What are some additional ways I can distribute leadership further?
- What support systems are needed to grow teachers into these leadership positions without them looking like “another thing” they have to do (buy in)?
- What informal leadership positions already exist within the school?

## **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insight into my wondering, I collected data through the following methods:

- Running record of leadership meetings (descriptive documentation)
- List of committees/leadership Aug. 2016 and April 2017
- Reflective journal on how I see leadership growing
- Personal interviews with teachers (2 vets and 2 newbies) to analyze effectiveness of distributive leadership
- Reflecting on the 2014-2016 school years, there were processes in place record meeting dates and topics discussed, but they were mostly for documentation purposes. During the 2016-2017 school year, they served a purpose - they were established and utilized to identify the needs of the school and

the various experts across the building that could fill those needs. I shifted from me being the "beacon of knowledge" to empowering the staff to utilize each other for support. This was a transition that the entire staff had to adjust to, as stated in the purpose statement.

I was able to collect data through running records (which was already in place), a reflective journal (which helped me to dissect the day to day operations of the school and my leadership), and through interviews with staff (helping me to improve communication, reflection and next steps). Data was collected between August 2016 and April 2017.

Thanks to this process, I feel like I do not carry the as much of a load on my back on a day to day basis. Teachers feel empowered to support their peers, they are able to access different avenues of learning, and I am able to strike a better balance between my responsibilities as the building principal by distributing leadership opportunities among my staff.

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data, two important things I learned include:

- Distributive Leadership had a positive impact on the climate and culture of SES.
- Distributive Leadership led to a more efficient and engaging setting for certified staff.

My first learning statement, "Distributive Leadership had a positive impact on the climate and culture of SES" was the overwhelmingly obvious outcome. Staff could be found laughing, attending social events, and collaborating at a higher rate. By empowering the teachers to lead these committees (SPED, CLASS, Tech Integration, etc), I was able to sit back and observe and advise as needed. Teachers took more ownership of what was happening in the school and were able to identify ways to start running with things instead of needing me to take the lead on everything. Through distributive leadership, I was able to go from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. One teacher made the comment during my interviews, "It has empowered teachers to take decisions in their own hands and given them a sense of ownership in school decisions. We are now responsible for the CLASS Support Team and PLC Leadership Team. We are able to 'run' with our grade level PLC time since you (Glen) have us moving in the right direction. Our faculty meetings have staff presenting things instead of just sitting and listening." Another teacher stated, "Classroom teachers are leading meetings while you (Glen) are able to step back and support as needed. When you (Glen) start to hand over responsibility to us, we were able to lead our own decisions, take our own notes, and make decisions for our kids. It has had a huge impact on the culture of the school."

My second learning statement, "Distributive Leadership led to a more efficient and engaging setting for certified staff," is supported with our running record of faculty meeting and committee notes. During the 2015-2016 school year, I led 5/9 school level committees. During the 2016-2017 school year, I led 0/9 of the school level committees. In addition to this, we have Wednesday Morning PD each week. During the 2015-2016 school year, I led 24/36 PD sessions. During the 2016-2017 school year, I led 8/36 PD sessions. These are two examples of the power of distributive leadership, in conjunction with my first learning statement. Teachers were not only physically empowered to lead meetings and PD, but they were also empowered emotionally and socially to lead. Veteran teachers learned from "newbies," as well as the inverse. Being pulled to an impromptu meeting at the central office, for example, is no longer a problem because the teachers are now in the driver's seat with their learning and focus on students.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

I have learned that the leader I want to be may not be the leader the staff needs at a specific moment in time. When I arrived at SES in 2014, the school was divided and needed to heal. I am a collaborative person who wants to bring stakeholders alongside to help generate ideas of how we can get better - and then go out and do it. When I arrived, the staff was not ready for this type of leadership. Working under the previous principal for 20+ years where everything was top/down was the culture. Culture and climate both take time to change. The staff was not ready for a collaborative approach because they didn't know how to operate in that manner. I spent 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 meeting their leadership needs by being the person out in front who directed them when and where to jump. Now, that sounds like I was top/down... that is not the case. I gave them the structure they needed as we transitioned to a more collaborative, distributive leadership style. As retirements took place those two years, I was able to hire in new staff that did not know any different. In 2016-2017, we were ready to transition to an environment where teachers were ready to lead. There were always a few teachers chomping at the bit, but this was finally their opportunity, within the culture of the school, to take the lead. I knew I was ready to make the change!

A second thing I have learned about my teachers, that I believe they learned about themselves, is that they were leaders all along. When given the opportunity to lead, and the support and confidence is in place to make the change, it doesn't take long for the transition from crawl-walk-run to happen! The teachers knew what my expectations were for PLCs, CLASS, questioning, data collection, etc. were because I was there to tell them on a daily basis for two years. Once they stepped into the leadership roles, they not only met those expectations, but exceeded them because they had the freedom to bring their expertise to the table, that was suppressed for so many years. I believe I have an all-star cast of teachers at SES and they are continuing to grow each day, which allows me to grow personally as I learn to trust that things will get done without my direct hand print on the end product.

A third thing I learned was that the process of distributive leadership has a significant impact on my professional and personal life. The life of a principal, as we all know, requires us to juggle so many things on a daily basis. When I am able to pass a few of those things off to my teachers, and I am able to be confident that everything will be ok, I am able to focus my energies on other things that require my attention. This year has been a huge relief to know that if I have to be 10 minutes late to a CLASS Support Team meeting, I will walk in to a group of dedicated educators who will be 10 minutes deep in their meeting with actionable items ready to run past me. Personally, this has freed up time for me to be the husband and father I need to be. Going home in the evenings, I can take those bike rides while it is still light outside with my daughter who is in kindergarten. I can read picture books with her before bed. I can help my middle school son with homework, go on a run, or play a game with him. My wife doesn't have to make dinner on her own while I work on evaluations or answer more emails. When the day is over, I am able to walk out of the school and know that everything will be there tomorrow. I know that there is a building full of individuals working together as one unit do do what is best for each other and the students of SES.

As I look forward to the future, I am excited! I can't wait for the upcoming school year to build on what we have accomplished when it comes to distributive leadership this year. I would like to stretch my teachers' thinking further when it comes to looking at data to drive instruction. Right now, they are looking at data on the surface level as it pertains to being on grade level in reading and math. We need to dive deeper into the data to see why a student is or is not on grade level. What are the specific standards that we need to work on? What are some strategies that are working in Mrs. Smith's classroom that Mr. Jones can try? This is a type of leadership that we need to develop at SES. We need to take the next step in drilling things down, and there are teachers who are strong in this that will need to rise to the occasion. I look forward to the next steps our CLASS Support Team takes, how our Wednesday Morning PD will develop (we are looking to dedicate two Wednesday a month to "What I Need" time for teachers tied to CLASS, Tech Integration, PBL, and our Math

Grant), and our discipline committee. It is an exciting time at SES and I am so happy that I get to step back and scaffold for my teachers as they grow in their own leadership capacities to impact student learning.

**References:**

N/A