

Key Elements of Leadership Excellence for Multi-Classroom Leaders:

# Build Team Cohesion

*Build team spirit and help your team collaborate productively to achieve your common goal of teaching and learning excellence.*

“A lot of time was spent getting to know each other and building the team as a whole”—*Multi-Classroom Leader Lauren Woodworth*

In many ways, this element of leadership can be the most fun, but also one of the most challenging, both multi-classroom leaders and principals say, because it is crucial to start team relationships off on the right foot. Begin early to build positive, supportive, collaborative relationships, so that addressing challenges in the team becomes straightforward, routine, and less emotionally fraught.

Building team cohesion includes **planning, communicating, executing, and improving** these actions:

- \* **Build relationships**
- \* **Collaborate**
- \* **Address challenges**
- \* **Celebrate successes**

\* **Build relationships**

Multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) cite the need to **build strong team relationships as paramount** from day one. Their efforts must, they say, **feel genuine and be consistent, to build trust over time.**

This isn't, they point out, rocket science, but rather ongoing **small, simple steps**. Even so, many MCLs say they had to learn the hard way how much these steps matter—because they feel the urgency of their students' needs and leadership logistics are time-consuming, they could overlook the need to spend time building relationships with their teachers.

**Before the school year starts, meet with each member** of the team (MCLs suggest informal meetings for coffee or lunch) to learn about why they chose to teach, their personal situations, their teaching and coaching styles, and their expectations and hopes for the year. Some MCLs ask their teachers to take a survey to gauge in detail how each teacher likes to work.

Then, MCLs bring the team together to begin to **set the tone for how team members interact**, establishing norms and expectations and setting goals.

“Of course it's important to know who and what each team teacher cares about, but just as importantly, you

have to **respect and understand the teaching style** they bring to the classroom, instead of just barging in and expecting them to do what you say. If teachers are truly seen and heard beforehand, and if they trust you, your team will be more likely to accept critique. The time I take to understand each team teacher personally and professionally is the foundation for everything that I do.”—*MCL Karen Wolfson*

“I was a ‘hit the ground running’ type of person, and I would so, so, so encourage people to build relationships. Ask about their personal life, ask how their dog is doing, ask how their husband was or their date or what their plans are for the weekend—**that's where they start trusting you**, and when you feel more friendly, I think they're more open to working with you, and I've come a long way in that, I have to be aware of it. But I think it's helped. I had a teacher email me that she appreciated that I asked her about her life.”—*MCL Jessica Smith*

“I really try to **build genuine relationships** with my teachers as people—I have learned to kind-of treat the teacher profession like other professions where you meet outside of work to do things together. I do really focus on trying to get us outside of work, hanging out together and building these relationships. I've really learned that is crucial and sometimes overlooked. Then when we have our first formal meeting, I try to stay objective with data and just say, ‘This is what our job is, again, I'm not trying to come in and tell you are a bad teacher in any way’—the focus is always kids and achievement.”—*MCL Erin Burns*

“It's difficult if you're **working with somebody who does not want to try to build that relationship**. Sometimes people just put up that wall, and they get

very defensive. As a coach you have to be open to that, being able to build the relationship. Especially initially with people, I try to feel them out and let them lead a little more of the discussions and conversations.”—*MCL Frank Zaremba*

**Consistency, repetition, and reliability** all matter greatly in building trust and thus strong relationships, MCLs say.

“A lot of time was spent getting to know each other and building the team as a whole, and also, just being present and showing up—you know, **being in the classrooms when you say you’re going to be in the classroom, providing that extra support when they ask for it.** My teachers know that they can call or text at any time and I will show up at their door and give them whatever they need, whether that’s behavior support, emotional support, or if they need to run to the restroom real quick! I am there for them, and I think those early days of just being present and building those relationships, but also giving the feedback in a way that was tangible and actionable and not overwhelming—oftentimes, when you’re trying to coach someone, it’s very easy to slip into, “Oh my gosh, we have to fix all of these things,” but giving them one thing at a time has really helped to build that trust. Because I wasn’t saying this is a disaster, we need to fix it; let’s try this, and it’s going to be better, and when it is, we are building that relationship and fostering that communication back and forth, that they know they can come to me for support.”—*MCL Lauren Woodworth*

“The relationship that we build with the teachers during our coaching sessions I think is 100 percent the reason why we are successful. If I did not meet with my teachers once a week, one-on-one and talk to them about not just what they need to do in their classroom but what they did over the weekend, or what they’re struggling with, or how they’re feeling, I would never meet with them and talk with them besides in the group setting. So I think that that **one-on-one time** that our principal has mandated is an awesome mandate, because he’s provided us with the time during the school day to do that. We have the materials and the resources to do it, and because of that, we just are able to form such a close relationship with the teachers we work with.”—*MCL Adrienne Ciccarello*

**Clear and consistent communication**—on matters great and small—also builds trust.

“**Communicating with my teachers is probably my number one priority.** This is an urban school, and urban schools have a lot of challenges. And so to be a teacher here, to stay a teacher here you have to be incredibly flexible, you have to be incredibly adaptable. That’s actually something I’m not and so, as a result, I probably over-communicate, I hyper-communicate. I send out a weekly email blast with announcements, I send out the PLC agenda the day before, I send out reminders to update their spreadsheets, I send them email if I’m going to be out of the building letting them know. I want them to know that I’m thinking of them; I want them to know that they are my priority and I’m here to support them, and that even though things outside of their classroom might be chaotic, if I am in control of something, I will ensure that it gets done in a timely fashion. That’s the biggest way to build relationships, to build trust, and to ensure that you have a team that responds to you, a team that works together, a team that does their best work, because if they know you care, if you come through on your promises and your commitment to them, then they’ll come through for you.”—*MCL Hadley Moore*

## \* Collaborate

To be successful as a team leader requires **establishing common goals, maintaining authority as the leader, and listening to others on the teaching team,** being open to their needs and concerns.

“Having that open communication to **make sure that everyone’s on the same page,** that everyone has the same goals, that everyone understands what the end goal is and making sure everything we do is working towards that end goal is so paramount, because once you start to get a little bit of a rift, or people don’t feel like they’re included or decisions are being made without them, it can really cause some problems, so that’s why these Friday meetings are so imperative for us because it really makes sure we’re all clear on what’s expected, where we’re going, and who is responsible for what so that everyone feels that the whole ship is moving in the right direction.”—*MCL Sarah Skopelitis*

“My team had all been here before I came... I started writing the lesson plans, I started writing the curriculum, and I started collaborating with the teachers on that, asking them, ‘What do you think?’ As soon as one particularly resistant teacher saw the lesson plan, she goes, ‘Oh wow, this is going to be good’ and that was kind of the moment where I felt like, ‘OK, I’m

making some progress here.’ Another thing that really helped was I have a very stocked fridge of their favorite sodas; I have a hidden file cabinet that the children think is filled with literature but it’s actually filled with snacks. Just things so that they know that my office can be a safe place for them, and they come in my office for a can of Coke, sometimes it’s just to vent—we’ve built really strong personal and professional relationships.” —*MCL Hadley Moore*

MCLs also point to the help they can get from collaborating with other MCLs when they hit trouble spots on their own teams.

### \* Address challenges

MCLs identify multiple keys to handling challenges within the team: **understand what happened from different perspectives; reflect on or seek out possible underlying issues driving a conflict; address challenges promptly; keep the focus on how a challenge is affecting students, backed up with data; and help team members to resolve conflicts** on their own.

“I don’t like conflict, and so I find that I tend to be that person to mediate and find the common ground. I’m always looking to see how can we work things out? When you’re talking about different people with different personalities, different backgrounds, it really does change the way you deal with other people. That has made me to look to say, **‘What is their story, what are they adding to it?’** Because my perception, again, is not always the right way; there may be a better way than mine.” —*MCL Stacie Burns*

“I think because we’ve built a relationship, those conversations don’t take a turn for the worse. **Difficult conversations can go down the wrong road fast. I script them out;** occasionally, I’ll practice it with another MCL. I’m really empathetic with my teachers and I know they’re human, I’m human, but our students come first and it’s urgent. My urgency helps me to just go ahead and stand up and say, “Hey, that wasn’t right. This is what we need to do, and here are your next steps.” —*MCL Sydney Mboob*

MCL Russ Stanton would tell his team directly why he approached them the way he did—explaining the leadership training he’s received—and **solicit their feedback** on how he should work with each team member. Having that understanding in place “helps with difficult conversations—most of the time it comes

up where a pair of teachers are having an issue, so we have a conversation together and we all know kind of how we handle each other, so it makes it easier.”

When teachers on her team disagreed, MCL Kristin Cabbage realized that she needed to **show them how to resolve problems themselves**. “I coach them through how to address it with the teacher and how to have a conversation that isn’t exactly easy. So on one of my other teams, there was a teacher that was not turning things in to them on time, so they were all rushing around right before kids got there, and the other two were getting them days in advance. So they were like ‘what do we do about this?’ I’m like, “We have a conversation, but *you* have the conversation, not me’—handing that power over to them. So just training them on how to say, ‘When you turn in the lessons late, it impacts me because...,” and so, I’ve done role playing and stuff like that. I put it back on them to handle it because it’s a skill that they need to have and be able to have open communication, because I don’t want to be like the team mom all the time.”

MCLs should promptly address challenges with individual teachers, as well as conflicts among team teachers.

“We have high expectations for our staff members, and there are times when I go into a classroom and I see something that is subpar, not best for our children, and I have to address it with the teacher. I do it by not making it personal; it’s always about data, it’s always about the baseline. For example, I’ve gone into a classroom and I’ve seen where a lot of students were off task. So when I meet with the teacher one-on-one I’ll just show the data: ‘I noticed 15 times you had to call on this particular student. Why do you think that happened? What do you think you can do to decrease the number of times you call on a student?’ Though it’s hard, I also have those same questions asked of me, if my administrator goes into a classroom and sees something that’s off. I think when teachers understand that we all have the same goal, to change the education or outcomes of the scholars who come here—and if we don’t do that, what that means for them, their life outcomes—that work becomes easier. **It never feels good to hear that you’re not meeting the expectations, but those conversations are needed.**” —*MCL Lara Harris*

## \* Celebrate successes

MCLs often emphasize the urgency of their work, and the need to empathize with their teams about how difficult it can be. That makes celebrating successes crucial: **Celebrate early wins—and create the conditions for them—and continue the momentum with routine recognition of successes.**

Make “shout-outs” the first item on the agenda for regular team meetings; find a variety of things worth celebrating, big and small.

“Our kindergarten teachers are phenomenal teachers, but the kindergarten students came in so low this year—didn’t know any letters, any sounds, couldn’t write their name—not generally where a typical kindergartener comes into school. So, reminding those teachers that this is where your students came in and this is where they are now is important and keeps the teachers motivated.”—MCL Kellie Brotherton

“I think both teachers and students need small wins and small victories. It’s not a leap that we’re all of a sudden just going to [go from] 40 percent to 80 percent, so if we go from 40 percent to 45 percent, I’m really excited about that, and I’m going to praise you on that. The more excitement that you exude, the more your kids are going to exude—same for teachers.”—MCL Jessica Smith

MCL Molly Whelan emphasizes the how much more effective a team is when teachers have fun and feel celebrated. “It makes it fun when we have a good relationship and we can joke with each other and be serious and be receptive to feedback.”

At every meeting, Whelan plans for five minutes of highlighting teacher and student successes.

“We do celebrations during our weekly data meeting, and when I do celebrations for the team, I try to find a celebration with everyone at some point, and I think that helps build confidence.”

*Note: Some quotes have been edited for clarity and length.*

**Learn More:** Watch the [Build Team Cohesion](#) videos.

### Discussion Questions

1. Which actions in this element of leadership excellence are **strengths** for you or your team?
2. Which actions in this element of leadership excellence are **weaknesses** for you or your team?

Think about actions you never take, fail to take as often as needed, or do not take as well as needed to achieve strong learning growth consistently.

3. What one to three specific changes will you or your team make to **use your strengths more** often or more consistently and **improve weaknesses** in the coming months?
4. Make a brief **action plan** with specific goals, roles, and time by which you will make specific changes!
5. Did your changes produce **better learning results**? If so, keep them. If not, think again about what other changes to make!

For more elements of instructional leadership and excellence, visit the [Instructional Leadership and Excellence webpages](#), which each have **video clips** of teacher-leaders who have achieved high-growth student learning; **discussion questions** or developing your team and yourself; **training links** for ongoing professional development; and other **developmental resources** including books, videos, articles, and tools

For more on an Opportunity Culture, visit [OpportunityCulture.org](#).

We’re happy to hear your feedback on this element; [contact us!](#)

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