

Key Elements of Leadership Excellence for Principals:

Build Team Cohesion

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

“That probably would have been the number one thing—just making sure we did our due diligence in the spring to hire the right MCLs, and then we spent a lot of time with them over the summer. We did intentional team building; we did planning; we did a leadership retreat. We did all that to make sure that we were ready to hit the ground running.”—
Principal Jeremy Baugh

In many ways, this element of leadership can be the most fun, but also one of the most challenging, both principals and multi-classroom leaders 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

In interviews, multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) and principals routinely identify **strong team relationships** as key to success for teachers and students. But principals note the different challenges they face in leading a whole school, and even differences among themselves leading small elementary school staffs versus leading large high schools.

Strong Opportunity Culture principals rely heavily on **their instructional team of leaders, and place emphasis on forming solid relationships there**. Some tactics many use include:

- Paid summer planning time that includes extensive collaboration, allowing team members to get to know one another
- Planning retreats—even very simple, low-cost retreats provide a different way for team members to build relationships among themselves and see principals in different lights
- Routine and inviolable meetings of the instructional leadership team, with time set aside for sharing and collaboration as well as coaching and planning

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“When we are doing team-building activities, that’s intentional, so that you will also take that and use it with your teams of teachers because sometimes there’s just not the energy on the team, and you really have to work at **making sure they understand how to communicate with each other, how to handle a difficult situation, how to be up front and honest**, because we put it on the table: The data is ours collectively; it’s not yours as an individual,” Principal Phillip Steffes said.

He works to balance warm efforts to build relationships with some that may feel less comfortable, but help his leadership team gain more understanding into their own teaching teams. “I throw out a topic, I give them an agenda a week ahead of time and they know if it’s about trust, if it’s about being introvert or extrovert, all those type activities that we’re going to do when we come together in a round circle; they *have* to participate. And sometimes that awkward feeling is really good for them to remember when they go to their teams and they feel like, ‘oh, they just don’t want to cooperate’ or ‘they don’t want to do this,’ that’s a good way for me to remind them, ‘remember when you

felt this way and why you felt that way—I could have interpreted it this way but because I know more about you, I know that’s not what it is.’ So, getting to understand the people you are working with is real important.”

Another way to build relationships, principals say, is by **thinking of yourself as a “servant leader.”**

“It was going in, ‘What do you need?’ So they went in with a service attitude, and that’s how we started. And as that servant leader, then we move into changing your practice; but you don’t go in like a bulldozer, you go in like a feather and establish that trust. As long as I’m doing service leadership, then [MCLs] are going to do service leadership.”—*Principal Janet Moss*

* Collaborate

Successful Opportunity Culture principals also emphasize the need to **work as a team—maintaining their role as school leader, but listening to and working in collaboration with the school’s leadership team, setting the example for collaboration** on MCL teams as well.

“I think it’s understanding the vision of the school and the mission and what our drive is, and really knowing why everyone is here. The times that I’ve made the decision on my own or even just with the admin team, it backfires, because in hindsight some of the things that we see, or I see, are not the same as what the teachers see. They are in the trenches, and they know. **Coming together as a team and brainstorming those ideas** together really gives us the best decision in the end, because we’ve used everyone’s ideas and everyone’s input to come up with what needs to happen.”—*Principal Jigna Patel*

“Ultimately, we want to be an A+ school, and ultimately we will be an A+ school. We know that that takes time, and it takes very intentional steps, and one misstep in the wrong direction can cost us a year or two years—and our childrens’ lives are those year and two years. So that collaborative piece is vital in your instructional leadership team—they have to be able to tell me ‘no, that’s not the right answer’—that relationship of being partners in the leadership process and having a distributed leadership model so that everybody feels empowered to say, “I don’t think that’s the right step for us” and be able to say that to your principal and not feel like it’s going to be frowned upon. **This doesn’t work if you’re the kind of leader who needs yes-**

people, because you need people to challenge your thought and you need people to offer alternative ways of doing things.”—*Principal Janet Moss*

“I also listen deeply to the teacher-leaders—they are in so many ways *my* leaders. I need to listen to them to see what they need to succeed. What are the barriers standing in their way? I’m a barrier crusher—that’s my number 1 job. If these are the most effective teachers and they’re proven in the classroom, nothing should stand in their way, and that’s the role that I have.—*Principal Christian Sawyer*

Collaborating with teachers often means very simple but meaningful actions. For example, have MCLs help plan leadership team meetings, to ensure that the needs they see are addressed, and disseminate the results to the school.

“That’s a huge piece, because we are all on a team together and showing that united front is important. So they help to create that agenda to make sure that we’re talking about all of the components because, again, they’re in the classrooms or working with kids as well, so we’re hitting all of the components that they are looking at, and thinking about the data piece, the kids, the teachers, and creating that triangulation within the school building of ‘are we meeting the needs of everyone within the school?’”—*Principal Jigna Patel*

* Address challenges

Principals see three keys here: **don’t let issues fester, keep the focus on how a challenge is affecting students, and don’t try to solve every problem for your MCLs**—give them the means to do so themselves.

“If the relationship has been severed or if a really hard conversation has to happen, we’re going to talk about how that conversation is going to go down, and I will usually say, ‘So we have some options, and none of them have to happen right now, right?’ Sometimes in the heat of the moment, it’s not the best time, but we can role-play it right now and work it through. **Nine times out of 10, the conversations that you were dreading the most don’t turn out to be anything as hard as the pain of living in the tension of it being a fractured relationship.** And nobody is going to be able to fix that for you, and as a leader you’ve actually got to go in wanting to fix it first, right? Not waiting for the other person to come to you.”—*Principal Beth Thompson*

“One example of a time where I had a crucial conversation that went over well was when my MCL was struggling using the coaching model that we were all trying to use. She was a veteran and had gone through all these other coaching models; she didn’t want to use that coaching structure, and one of the meetings she had didn’t go over well because the teacher was like, ‘Well, that’s not how X meets with me.’ I had to sit her down and say, ‘I know you’re bringing so much expertise to the table, but the impact of you not following the coaching model is actually impacting your credibility and impacting the way that you work with this teacher, and in the end of the day impacting our students. Let me help you. So we worked through it. She knew I was coming from a place of ‘I want you to be the strongest you, so you can help our students and our teachers.’” —Assistant Principal Kristin Ward

Our MCLs “are all leaders and they’re all capable of making decisions, but they want me to articulate the decision most often, and I refuse to do it because that goes against everything that I’ve already said, which is collectively we succeed, collectively we handle our setbacks. So they really want clear communication from me about things, but what I’ve learned is that they want me to tell them things to do. I will call [problems] on the table; I don’t mind seeing people get a little antsy because sometimes that’s the learning in itself, right? And you don’t always have the answer and that’s OK.” —Principal Phillip Steffes

* Celebrate successes

Principals should routinely acknowledge and empathize with multi-classroom leaders and teachers about how challenging this work is, and the anxiety it can create. 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 instructional leadership team meetings; **track data on achievement and school culture to find a variety of things worth celebrating.**

“I think that the anxiety does kick in, but a clear conscience makes a soft pillow. We do everything we possibly can for our kids, and when we go home we’ve given every bit that we can give. Everybody considers your success my success, and we don’t have islands. We stick together, and I think that **building that sense**

of collaboration and sense of support for each other really helps us take on the anxiety—because we’re never going to have children who aren’t products of their society. Every problem that they run into out in the world they’re going to bring to school with them, and our job is to build them up and make them strong enough to handle it, and that’s what we do.” —Principal Janet Moss

For Principal Donnell Cannon, creating and maintaining a sense of joy was so important that his school created a culture plan to address it. “A part of one of our strategic goals for the year was to ensure that we had a culture of care for all...and then, how do we ensure that people are experiencing joy? We’re playing music in the cafeteria, we’re shouting out teachers, so that people in our building could experience joy, and **we were intentional about those things, so that we’re taking care of the people in our building**, and we could all experience joy together.”

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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