OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® An Initiative of Public Impact®

Key Element of Leadership Excellence for Principals

Launch and Lead

Establish leadership by ensuring the right people are on the team and clarifying the team's vision, goals, roles, and process for collaborating to achieve excellence.

"The vision for me as a building leader is that our kids deserve to have an exceptional school. The second step was, 'here's how we're going to get there,' and I was just really clear: We're going to put data out, and we're going to talk about it every week, because that which gets measured gets done. So we put it out there, and then from the data cycle—from the very beginning, with Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs)—we talked to all the staff members and said, 'You're going to have a coaching cycle with your MCL, and it will look like this; the data is going to be out there, you're going to work with them, but it's around what you need.' So we've always pushed it back to 'this is for you, this is a support for you.'"—*Principal Jeremy Baugh*

Hire the right people for each role, then set the tone and expectations for team members to ensure that all feel supported and clear about the work to come.

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Launching and leading a team includes planning, communicating, executing, and improving these actions:

∗ **Set team vision and goals**

∗ **Clarify team roles**

∗ **Organize team work process—how we work together**

  o Make team action plan and lead team to follow it

  o Make schedules and agendas for collaboration

∗ **Select the right people for each role**

∗ **Set team vision and goals**

For all team leaders, **setting and communicating a positive, clear vision and high-but-reachable goals must be a first step.** Principals leading an instructional team of leaders that includes teachers in the Multi-Classroom Leader® (MCL™) role, or other similarly empowered, accountable instructional teacher-leaders, understand the power of working toward common goals.

This element goes hand-in-hand with that of **building team cohesion**. Principals should guide but not fully dictate their team's formulation of a vision and goals. Collaborating on these helps build team cohesion—though goals should always meet the principal's standards in their ambitiousness for students.

"I knew coming in I would need to do something different, so I think I had the case for change, the sense of urgency," Principal Alison Harris Welcher said. "I'm a very slow-down-to-speed-up type of leader, so I think through conversation it really made clear why we needed to do this work. **I just made it clear that we've got to do something help our scholars catch up**. They are already coming to us behind. It is no one's fault, but it is everyone's responsibility. So what are we going to do? Are we going to continue to do as we have been or are we going to take some risks and do something different? And so it was decided from that core team that we're going to take some risks and make things happen."

Connecting the vision to schoolwide goals for instructional improvement is the next step. Erica Jordan-Thomas, who followed Welcher as the principal, knew that her teachers believed in their students' potential and just needed the tools to get them there.

"I think it is truly just a testament to how strong our belief is in kids within this building and among staff, that **we just deeply know that our kids can achieve at such a high level**—we are obligated to them," she said.

So with her leadership team, Jordan-Thomas focused on clear strategies to use schoolwide. "We said, 'What are the two instructional strategies that we are going to put a stake in the ground and stamp and we want to see in every single classroom?' … All right, now that we're going to focus on that, let's create the process that

we're going to use to provide professional development [PD] to teachers, as well as to follow up for coaching. So that created this really fluid process for MCLs to know, 'OK, over the next four weeks this is what my coaching is focused on, my walk-throughs, and my feedback.' And then from an assistant principal's standpoint, there's this same level of focus of 'you need to be having conversations with your MCLs around the same instructional strategy.'"

∗ Clarify team roles

When a school gets away from a one-teacher, one-classroom design, principals must **select their leaders wisely and set clear role expectations** for their new instructional team of leaders. They must be clear about what teacher-leaders can expect from them, take full advantage of their team's strengths, and understand where each teacher-leader will need support. Expectations for roles should be clarified in person and in writing, preferably starting long before hiring.

"Everything we did had a structure to it, had a process for it—**we were crystal-clear that everyone understood the process and that it was in writing**, that we had one-on-one meetings with everybody who was moving into leadership roles so that they were crystal-clear, or, 'here are the areas that we feel like you're strong going into this, here are the areas we feel like going into this you're going to need to continue to grow, and we're here to support you in that growth—but we need to be up front and transparent about that*."—Principal Beth Thompson*

∗ Organize team work process—how we work together

  o Make team action plan and lead team to follow it

Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas emphasized **consistency, creating rubrics and protocols** for the leadership and coaching of her instructional leadership team (ILT).

"Being able to actually state the process for every single thing that we expected was a part of their role, and in doing that, we had to give PD on it. It was a learning for me as a leader, **if we have a protocol, I can't just do it in a two-hour PD and expect people to have mastery**. It takes a good month of four PDs back to back to back, and then even after that whole month series of PD, I have to spiral it in the next two to three ILT meetings, using video for people to get peer feedback or doing some type of walk-throughs, to make it really sticky."

For Principal Jeremy Baugh, setting **clear processes around coaching and a data cycle** were crucial to following through on the vision.

"The vision for me as a building leader is that our kids deserve to have an exceptional school. The second step was 'here's how we're going to get there,' and I was just really clear: We're going to put data out, and we're going to talk about it every week, because that which gets measured gets done. So we put it out there and then from the data cycle, from the very beginning with MCLs, we talked to all the staff members and said, 'You're going to have a coaching cycle with your MCL, and it will look like this; the data is going to be out there, you're going to work with them, but it's around what you need.' So we've always pushed it back to 'this is for you, this is a support for you.' "

Principals consistently cite **summer planning time** as a key to implementing consistent processes.

"We met over the summer, and we planned consistent protocols across all of the MCLs—so we have protocols for a data meeting, for a co-planning meeting, for any type of meeting that an MCL could lead with a group of teachers. We came up with protocols so that they're all doing it the same way. Because one of the things that we were finding is some differences of how the MCLs were running the meetings, and teachers were starting to notice that," Principal Rria Cruz-Soto said. "It was really important because we have schoolwide initiatives, and it's important that everyone is receiving the same information and giving out the same information—when we're looking at how teachers are buying in, we need that the information be given consistently."

Beth Thompson followed up her initial efforts to clarify team roles with the promise of a **process for when changes arose**.

"There are always pieces that you don't anticipate, but our commitment was that if things rose along the way, there would be a one-on-one, face-to-face meeting to recommit. It wouldn't be just a random email saying, 'guess what, now I need you to do x, y , or z.' And while it was painful on the front end, sitting down, hashing it all out, putting it all in writing, having meeting and meeting after meeting, the payoff is that there's just no room for ambiguity around what it is we're going to do, around who's going to do it, and if you've opted in, you've signed on the dotted line your commitment that this is what you agreed to. Then there's much less room for resentment down the road or a feeling of like, 'oh, I'm being taken advantage of or this isn't what I expected,' " Thompson said.

  o **Make schedules and agendas for collaboration**

Standing meetings and clear expectations and communication made collaboration easier for Principal Rria Cruz-Soto. "My instructional leadership team—the MCL team—they meet every Tuesday on their own without me just so they can talk about their coaching cycles and any upcoming things that they need to talk about, and their data cycles. The following day, they meet with me. We also have our building union rep at the meeting, so that we are all on the same page. This year I included him in all of the meetings because I felt that it was really important, because sometimes teachers will go to the union rep and say, 'Why are we doing this?' and because he wasn't at the instructional leadership team meeting, it was difficult. So now we put him on the team so he really understands how and why all the decisions are being made and is able to give that information to the teachers. It eliminates a lot of problems."

Principal Janet Moss set **creating a master schedule that makes collaboration easy** as a priority. "Our schedule is a rotating master schedule, and the children are in cohorts and they go to multi-grade-level electives. What that does is it frees up the time for the MCL because before, if each grade level goes to electives separately, then the MCL has to meet with sixth grade [teachers] and then go meet with seventh and then go meet with eighth grade, and it's more of a choppy day, and they have to spend all of their time in planning and not in the classroom. We revised the entire master schedule around the MCL model, so now with multi-grade-levels going to electives at the same time, then we have departmental planning.

"So all math teachers are off first block, and the MCLs and the math teachers are meeting together. It helps with vertical alignment. It helps with the amount of time the MCL has to spend in planning, because once that block is over, the rest of their day they are in classes. Rather than spending a lot of time talking to grown-ups then, they're in front of the classes with the grown-ups and actually doing the modeling and co-teaching that is vital for the coaching piece."

The power of **careful scheduling** can't be underestimated, principals say.

"Most important to me is a consistent time daily for teachers to come together for a [team meeting]. So in order for that to happen we have to have a set time in our schedule, and our MCLs have to be protected. They are not used to sub—they have to be available to lead

those sessions, have the opportunity to have access to the data quickly so that they can study it and make sure they are formulating the questions to ask, to help the teachers better understand what's in front of them. But also, that schedule has to allow time for them to get in and coach and to observe those teachers. "—*Principal Philip Steffes*

∗ Select the right people for each role

Using a **carefully designed, transparent selection process** can help a school put the right people in each role and encourage staff support for the school's leadership team.

The first criterion for selecting multi-classroom leaders, in particular, is **prior high-growth student learning**, ideally achieved with a similar population of students.

For all roles, as noted in the selection toolkit, a **behavioral event interview process (BEI) can help schools find the right fit for each role.**

Principal Donnell Cannon has embraced BEIs as he confronts the challenges of hiring in a rural, economically stressed region.

"We engaged in the BEI process, so we were looking for certain competencies that mattered to us, and **we used the BEI process to distill the candidates that were just right for our building**, and by doing that it allowed us to ensure that we had remarkable people in front of kids, in front of our teachers every day. The BEI process helps us find on a deep level what mattered to those people and how have they displayed certain patterns and thinking and behaving over time," Cannon said.

For Principal Sarah Reeves, an **open hiring process** builds trust in the Opportunity Culture® model and ensures that the school selects the best teachers to lead. Her staff also agreed that teachers in Opportunity Culture® roles, such as the MCL™ role, would re-interview every year for their position.

"So, unlike the district where we have a district pool—where you have to apply every so many years with the proven data—we decided the way we're going to help support the culture is to ensure that every [Opportunity Culture] staff member re-interviews for their position every year," Reeves said. "Based on the data needs of the school and then, specifically, the needs of the scholars that are coming up in that grade level, that's how we're going to decide the amount of roles that we

need and then we're going to match the human capital and talent with the needs of the specific grade levels."

Reeves wanted broad involvement in interviews to build the trust in her school's staffing plans.

"We created a committee of teachers that were anywhere from their first to fifth year that were not choosing to apply [for an Opportunity Culture role], as well as community members and school leadership members as well as administration—all came together to host a panel that really conducted those interviews. It really was a community that appointed these individuals," Reeves said. "We used a rubric that was very clear and precise, and it really enabled both the [current Opportunity Culture] teachers to showcase their talents and their successes, but also share feedback from the year and share what they would like to do or what their vision would be for the role in the upcoming year, so it was a great brainstorming session. It also allowed a lot of buy-in from our parents. So there wasn't ever really a question of favoritism because it was on such a clearly communicated platform, and there was a protocol that we went through."

Cannon also brought some of his high school's students into the hiring process, formally and informally. Interviews included students from the school's student leadership committee, as well as students who feel more marginalized. "We invite them to be a part of the interview because they also give a very unique perspective and can truly inform our model and truly inform that interview process."

Cannon even made a point of getting feedback from students who have simply escorted an interviewee to the interview room. "So we have three kids who sit on the BEI committee and then we have two kids whose job is just to walk the candidate from the office to the PLC room; did they speak to our custodians, did they ask anything about our vision, did they ask anything about, you know, where we're headed, who we are, ask anything about you? And that matters to us, so those things, all considered, determines whether or not someone is in our building."

When principals look at the qualities they want in Opportunity Culture® educators, they focus on **leadership skills for the MCL™ role, and for everyone, receptiveness to coaching.**

"**The people working with the MCLs have to believe that the MCLs are guiding them in the right direction.**

When choosing MCLs, you have to choose people who can work with adults, because it's a very different skill. You sometimes find people who are wonderful with children but grown-ups don't like them. You have to find those special adults who can not only develop relationships with children, but also coach adults in a respectful way in which the grown-ups feel like they're being supported and not demeaned, and that they are growing and that everybody's pulling in the same direction, and it's all for that greater good. But beyond the greater good, it's to make me a better teacher. It's a very personal thing for the teachers who are being coached, and they have to see the benefits of it and see the expertise of the MCLs. It's a huge trust factor."— *Principal Janet Moss*

Principal Meaghan Loftus listens hard in interviews to prospective **teachers' answers about receiving feedback**. "We name the common expectations in language we have here and then we say, guess what, you get to be here and be supported. That's what people usually want, and so we pitch it as a positive thing, but we also ask questions around coachability and just understanding whether or not the teacher's been receptive to feedback, what they've done with feedback from the past, what makes feedback good in their eyes, what makes it hard. So really getting to hear their answers on that allows us to quickly determine fit. [Later,] if someone is really upset by getting feedback or is closed off, the coach or the MCL attends that conversation first and then it feeds right up to me, and part of our deal was that you came here for that reason. It actually becomes an easy conversation, we're just so up front about it."

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

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Learn More: Watch the *Launch and Lead* 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!**