

Key Elements of Leadership Excellence:

Manage Yourself

Take care of yourself and improve your leadership and professional skills and competencies to achieve consistent performance.

“If we’re all showing up, we’re all happy doing this work, and we have the energy to keep doing it, we could actually see some really outstanding, amazing things for children.” — *Principal Donnell Cannon*

When school and teaching team leaders work to improve their skills and keep an eye on their physical and mental health, everyone in the building benefits, from other teachers to students to staff.

Managing yourself includes planning, communicating, executing, and improving these actions:

- * Clarify your role—clarify and re-clarify your role as your team and school changes
- * Improve your own actions, competencies, and skills
- * Contribute to next level of leadership
- * Stay healthy for long-term performance

The ability to communicate effectively—even with yourself!—affects every aspect of the job for principals and multi-classroom leaders (MCLs), and **great communication runs through almost every aspect of this element.**

Strong leaders know they need to **routinely re-evaluate their own role**, clarifying what they should focus on and what their teams should expect from them.

This fits most easily in routine meetings of a principal’s schoolwide instructional leadership team and a multi-classroom leader’s teaching team. Ideally, **the leader formally revisits the duties and expectations of the role before the school year begins, midyear, and at the close of the year**, getting feedback from the team to continue to refine and revise how leaders spend their time.

“What I did with my team was that I literally explained to them that my role is to support them in their instructional practice, and so, because of that, at the beginning of the year I created a PowerPoint to show what I’m responsible for and to show the different ways that I can support the team. I just think that sitting down and breaking that down and really explaining it to the teachers this year has helped me in order to make sure that they buy in, and proving to them that what I say is what I’m actually doing at the end of the day.” — *MCL Jacqueline Smith*

Successful MCLs and principals say they **actively seek training** in areas where they feel less skilled or successful. “Two out of the past three years, I’ve been involved in some type of outside program or fellowship just to continue moving or learning. It’s been critical for me to just really have the skill set of managing an instructional leadership team.” — *Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas*

“I had very little experience with leading a team to the extent that MCLs are required to do. So I knew very little and I needed professional development. That has changed a lot over the last three years as far as what I have sought out; at first it was time management and it was difficult conversations and it was what a coaching conversation looks like, and there was a lot of learning there just about the logistics, but now, it’s a lot more nuanced and so I really, really value the hour [or] 90 minutes that I get with my coach, who is the principal, every week, because she really does help me clarify things that I’m still struggling with. She and I are working on my weekly data meetings, and so every week I video my weekly data meetings and send them to her so that she can give me feedback on how they can be better. It’s such small details, but what we find is that when those small details are the right details, that has a huge impact on the clarity of my data meetings with my teachers and also, that turns around and has a huge impact on the effectiveness of the reteach based on that data.” — *MCL Ellen Rayburn*

“If I feel that something did not go well, [I’m] making sure I’m reflective and improving it for next time or next year—just making sure that when we have a system we are always working to improve it—because you want to be the best, and our kids deserve the best, so doing anything less is not an option.” — *MCL Lauren Woodworth*

Contributing to the next level of leadership helps leaders understand and shape the larger context within which their own teams operate. This helps leaders manage their own teams more effectively.

In most Opportunity Culture schools, multi-classroom leaders are part of their school’s top leadership team, closely advising and learning from the principal and instructional assistant principal(s). By doing this, MCLs can both shape the culture of their schools and understand and communicate schoolwide policies to their teachers, which helps their own teams succeed.

Similarly, districts with multi-school leaders (MSLs) can provide principals with the same opportunity. Principals can shape multi-school team policies to support school excellence and understand the multi-school leaders’ perspective far better if the principals directly advise and learn from the MSL.

For Principal Rria Cruz-Soto, having a consistent message spread throughout the school via the instructional leadership team strengthens the school’s culture and leads to happier teachers.

MCLs “are my team of leaders. We help each other figure out ‘are we all on the same page, what are the next steps?’ Whatever ideas that I have or whatever focus I have, I need them to drive it down to the teachers, and make sure that whatever message I’m giving is the same exact message that they’re delivering to their teachers,” Cruz-Soto said. “The MCLs are very great about doing that. I don’t get any mixed messages—my teachers get exactly what the message is intended to be. In fact, our [student] behavior has gotten much better since the implementation of MCLs and the new code of conduct and restorative practices. They help to drive down those messages.”

Managing physical and emotional health strikes one of the deepest chords with principals and MCLs. Many of these leaders say they know what they should do to take care of themselves, but find they struggle with this in the face of often-overwhelming student needs.

Principal Donnell Cannon speaks forcefully on this, after realizing that he and his assistant principal were “literally at a place where we just couldn’t give any more, and the work was so hard....we were doing it nonstop, without taking care of ourselves.”

In his high-need school, where students face not only the repercussions of long-term poverty but also other traumas such as major flooding and homelessness

following multiple hurricanes, teachers must be seen as first responders to trauma, he said. That led the school to focus on helping everyone experience joy at school. But Cannon realized he also needed to take more radical steps in caring for himself and setting the right example for his staff.

“I no longer see self-care as separate from my vision for the work—those things are inextricably connected. Yes, I want to be on fire for children, and I want to be on fire in this building, but I also have to take care of myself too, whether it’s working out or reading a good book or experiencing joy in my own life with my family—that matters to me,” he said.

Cannon continued: “I had guilt before, where I thought that if I’m not doing really good work or if as a principal I’m not always doing the work, then I wasn’t being a good principal, and that’s the story that I told. But stepping out of that, it was just a story that I was telling, and exhaustion didn’t mean impact, right? So I needed to change that story... and I knew that if I were going to do this work long enough then, again, I had to take care of myself and that was a non-negotiable...because if we’re all showing up, we’re all happy doing this work, and we have the energy to keep doing it, we could actually see some really outstanding, amazing things for children. That’s something my team talks about quite a bit.

“We know that kids experience trauma at an increased rate each day, and we know how hard that is, and we know the biochemical impact that that has on the body and the neurological impact that has on the body and teachers being first responders to that...someone else’s trauma, it’s still secondary trauma, and if we’re not taking care of that then we carry that with us, and there’s no way that we can continue to do the work that we’ve committed to do if we aren’t raising that as a priority.”

MCLs and principals say they look for **little changes that can make a big mental and emotional difference**.

“I realized that I can’t stay at work 12 hours a day anymore because I have family at home. ... What do I need to do for tomorrow that’s going to directly impact student achievement? And if something is on my list and it’s due two weeks from now, and it doesn’t have a direct correlation to student achievement, then that’s something I can put on a later list. ...Our school has also done a really great job of sending all communication out for the following week before the weekend, so that

on the weekend you really are forced to at least take some break. I also have a 24-hour rule on the weekend, which is just **for 24 straight hours you do no work.**—*MCL Bri Waddell*

“I am a **schedule** girl—it is color-coded, when I’m supposed to be where—I adhere to it. I had to stick to that or I couldn’t do everything. —*MCL Nancy Breeyear*

“It’s challenging because when the need is so great and you’re passionate about what you do, you know that you will take it home, you’ll spend all the weekends doing everything that you need to do. But at the beginning of the year, I had to let my teachers know, ‘Hey, this will burn you out if you allow it, **take some time for yourself.**’ I always ask them, ‘What did you do this weekend? You should have done something fun. I’m not going to send you any emails Sunday before 9:00; you already know what I expect, at 9:00 is when you will get your email if I need to reach out to you. I’m not going to text you at home, you need to spend time with your family.’ I’m going to check on their well-being all the time, because I know the only way I get my best teachers is because they are well mentally and that’s important, especially in education because we think we can save the world all the time.”—*MCL Jonnecia Alford*

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

Learn More: Watch the [Manage Yourself](#) 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 the changes you made make a noticeable difference to you, teachers, or students? If so, keep them. If not, what should you adjust?

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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