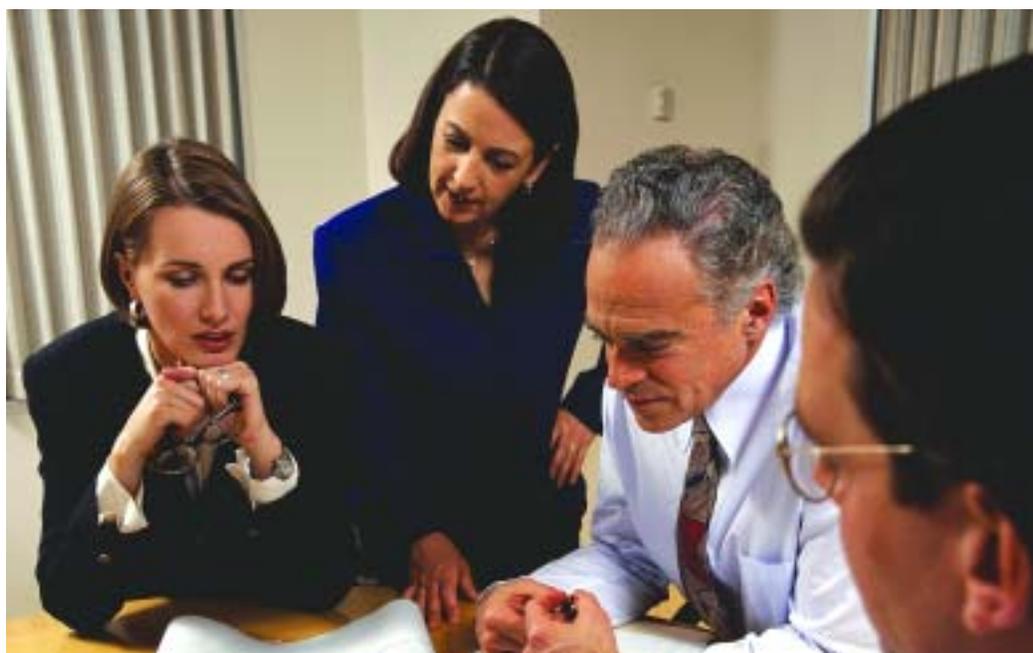


If to Do in Schools Were as Easy as to Know What Were Good to Do

My research and practice have focused on understanding change in schools and school districts. My journey began during the 1980's, when I became a school principal of a high school of 900 students. In that leadership role, I was constantly challenged and intrigued by the complexities of bringing about meaningful change. As I explored the literature on effective schools and change, it became readily apparent that some efforts were more beneficial than others and that school leadership was critical to success. In 1993, I completed a study focused on understanding the nature of instructional leadership for change at the school level. This study showed a positive relationship between specified instructional leadership behaviours exhibited by principals and the level of teacher commitment, professional involvement, and innovativeness. The study focused on the following specific leadership behaviours, identified by Hallinger and Murphy: framing school goals, communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, enforcing academic standards, and providing incentives for students.¹

Further analysis of the data from this study revealed that instructional leadership behaviours had a transformational effect when they were consistent with



Our findings are supported by a growing body of research suggesting that, **if schools are to succeed** in bringing about meaningful improvement, they **must have strong distributed leadership** that fosters organizational learning.

the professional norms and values held by teachers.² In order to further understand the impact of leaders in developing good schools, Jean Brown and I developed a research agenda that included both case study and survey research.³ In one of these studies, we developed a complex causal network of approximately 10 years of development in two high schools that had established national reputations as innovative schools. We concluded that, while competent leadership provided by

the principal was important in both schools, it was not sufficient to sustain the level of professional learning required for meaningful change. In both schools, the person filling the role of principal changed several times; however, the continuity of focus over time continued because leadership was distributed among others on staff. Without distributed leadership and sustained focus, it is likely that any change would have been short lived

because the shared knowledge structures stored in the long term memories of both schools served as impediments to any new, non-routine collective learning. Our findings are supported by a growing body of research suggesting that, if schools are to succeed in bringing about meaningful improvement, they must have strong distributed leadership that fosters organizational learning.

As we began to explore the connection between leadership, organizational learning, and successful schools, we accepted the definition of organizational learning put forward by DiBella, Nevis, and Gould as the capacity (or processes) within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience.⁴ We assessed the level of organizational learning through measures of each of Senge's five disciplines: *personal mastery*; *team learning*, *mental models*, *shared vision*; and *systems thinking*.⁵

The first of our studies relating to organizational learning occurred between 1995 and 1997 in thirteen schools with 312 teachers from three

While both the formal structures and approaches to leadership vary, **leadership in successful schools** is perceived to be strong, collaborative, distributed, and focused on specific goals.

school districts in Newfoundland. All schools were engaged in efforts to bring about change at the school level. Two main findings emerged from this study. First, we concluded that leadership approaches and practices that foster team leadership account for significant variance (15% to 70%) in levels of organization learning. Teachers described team leadership as visible, supportive, goal-oriented, visionary, change-oriented, collaborative, democratic, holding high expectations, intellectually stimulating, participatory, and inclusive. As well, they perceived that team leaders promoted high expectations, modelled behaviour, strengthened school culture, built collaborative structures, developed shared vision, and built consensus on school goals. Second, we concluded that those schools that had developed higher

levels of organizational learning were more focused on improving classroom practices.

While our findings – that there exists a positive relationship among team leadership, organizational learning, and classroom practices – were consistent with those of other researchers, we also learned that we cannot assume that all educators endorse team leadership or organizational learning as a means to successful change. In our role as critical research friends in 25 schools and four school districts, we began to recognize that both team leadership and organizational learning were often viewed as just another project or another school improvement process that was accepted as positive by some and ineffective by others. Furthermore, we learned that one cannot assume that those who are

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EN BREF

On ne peut créer de bonnes écoles en énonçant des politiques. La recherche indique que la capacité de changer les méthodes d'une école dépend pour beaucoup du degré d'apprentissage organisationnel suscité par le leadership d'équipe. Même si les structures et les approches formelles du leadership varient, le leadership dans les écoles efficaces est une démarche forte, coopérative, distribuée et centrée sur des objectifs précis. Là où il n'y a personne pour encourager le leadership d'équipe, une intervention externe peut être nécessaire. Un processus de questionnement axé sur l'action qui rend les individus et les organismes responsables de réaliser les objectifs formulés est une autre composante essentielle d'un apprentissage organisationnel réussi.

willing to accept the potential of team leadership and organizational learning will be able to make shifts in leadership approach without effort or difficulty. The ability of administrators to make the shift depends on their understanding of leadership theories, the extent to which potential followers view team leadership as appropriate, and the ability to deal with other contextual variables. Furthermore, without the principal's support, it is highly unlikely that teachers will be successful in leading a shift toward team leadership and organizational learning.

These conclusions led us to focus our research more specifically on developing an understanding of the factors that inhibit or facilitate team leadership and organizational learning in schools. The lessons we have learned can be adequately presented with reference to two separate and very distinct studies. The first was a two-year case study of an alternative school (pseudonym, PWA) for young offenders.⁶ The second (the *ICT project*) was a study of 15 schools (identified as static, moderately innovative, and innovative) in one Canadian province that have been involved in a national project directed at the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning.⁷ Six lessons learned from these studies are presented below.

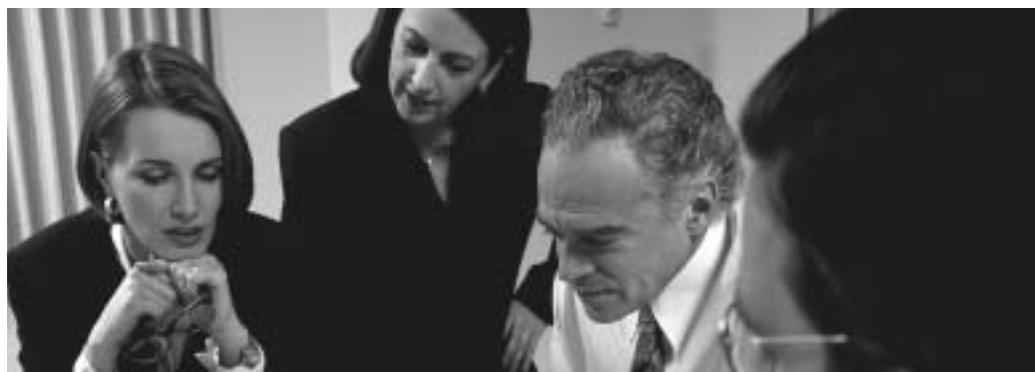
LESSON ONE: External pressures or interventions can be substantial catalysts for change, but they do not create sufficient tension to facilitate change in all schools.

In the ICT project, even though teachers in the static schools recognized advancements in technology, they employed defensive routines that insulated them from the creation of tensions that would initiate the need for learning. Shared knowledge structures stored in the long term memories of the static schools (Senge's mental models) were huge impediments to learning. These knowledge structures created a "groupthink" image of the school that allowed teachers to believe that change was not required. They accepted traditional models of leadership as well as traditional classroom practices.

LESSON TWO: In difficult organizational environments such as PWA and static schools, the formation of a leadership team may be essential.

At PWA, an Organizational Learning Leadership (OLL) team directly facilitated team leadership and organizational learning. The OLL team, composed of representatives from all constituent groups in the organization, was empowered to promote a new culture of openness and collaboration that impacted positively on staff morale and became a catalyst for the surfacing of many learning inhibitors.

Findings from the ICT project supported the need for a leadership team as well, with a caveat that the existence of such a team did not ensure organizational learning. During our



Organizational learning is a means to developing successful schools, but it will not occur by simply stating that we want it to be so.

In the innovative and moderately innovative schools, however, just making such programs available did result in learning in all schools. A comparison of the three success levels of schools (innovative, moderately innovative, and static) allowed us to conclude that the successes in the more innovative schools were dependent upon school leaders who fostered school cultures of shared leadership that facilitated learning throughout the whole school community. Similarly in the PWA case study, we found that over the course of several years, PWA had resisted external pressures that resulted from multiple crises; however, when the school administrators were convinced to change the model of leadership, change began to occur.

investigation of the ICT project, we found that the mere existence of committees and school improvement teams did not guarantee that a continuity of focus was maintained over time. If such teams were simply contrived school structures subject to the decision-making powers of the principal, they served neither as effective catalysts of change nor as effective agents to ensure continuity of focus. However, where school teams were empowered to provide the necessary leadership, they functioned as champions of the process. In the more innovative schools – unlike the static schools – leadership teams genuinely exercised leadership and acted to champion the goal of integrating ICT into teaching and learning.

LESSON THREE: In spite of the evidence that team leadership is positively related to improved organizational learning and school success, it is difficult in some organizations to change the existing culture of leadership.

A commitment from senior administrators and other key organizational participants to change to a model of team leadership was just a small first step in PWA. The senior administrators made some efforts to share leadership, and various individuals accepted their new responsibilities in this regard; however, competing models of leadership were at play. For example, while some formal leaders were anxious to share leadership, others preferred the more traditional, hierarchical, approach. As well, several unionized employees assumed that the leadership team was to operate in a model of adversarial labour-management negotiations and refused to engage in dialogue. Similarly, in the ICT project, the degree of support for, or skepticism toward, team leadership varied considerably among innovative, moderately innovative, and static schools. We concluded that if change is to occur, senior management must be committed to organizational learning and must provide strong leadership in order to overcome organizational resistance. The actions required of the leader may even result in a leadership paradox, as the formal leader may be required to unilaterally dictate that the leadership model will be changing to team leadership.

LESSON FOUR: Dysfunctional organizational learning patterns can be minimized through the action research process.

Knowledge acquired through internal or external sources can be passively accepted without any meaningful learning, and promises may not result in action. The result of such inaction and non-learning may go unnoticed without an established action research process. All of the static schools were aware of the ICT project, and several had made plans to implement ICT into teaching and learning practices; however, one

initiative followed another without any real commitment to change. In the more innovative schools, action research cycles of meaningful assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation ensured commitment and accountability. We found, however, that in spite of its importance, implementation of an action research process proved to be rather difficult in the early stages of the PWA change initiative. Participants had little previous experience with such a process and found the level of accountability that is inherent in the model quite threatening. It is highly likely that action research would have been abandoned without the support provided by a champion.

LESSON FIVE: Before a shared vision can be developed, an organization must define its boundaries between internal and external constituents.

While boundary definition becomes difficult in public schools, the extent of “openness” of the system boundaries must be addressed. At PWA, boundary definition became an issue when the leadership team began to engage in the development of a shared vision. Even though most internal constituents deemed it important to develop a shared vision, they recognized that in their very “open” system, that process was quite complex. They believed that, if the PWA team was to learn new organizational patterns, they had to engage all constituents served by the school. In spite of this recognition, they also reached a conclusion that building a vision for this school was so controversial that any articulated vision would likely either represent such a compromise that it would be meaningless, or lead some group to feel totally disenfranchised. In the end, the leadership team narrowed the organizational boundaries in the vision building process in order to protect the school from further division that the team believed would threaten the school’s very survival. It appears that organizational boundaries are based in context and that each school must define its own boundaries in order to determine which constituent groups must share its organizational vision and which groups must be consulted.

LESSON SIX: Individual learning is essential to organizational learning (Senge’s personal mastery).

At PWA, several individuals brought new knowledge to the school while they were pursuing their personal educational goals. The sharing of this new knowledge became an essential component of an accelerated pace of learning at PWA.

The PWA study revealed, as well, the negative impact of ignoring individual learning. PWA supported learning for some groups more than for others. Individuals in the groups that were not supported perceived that they were not valued and that there was a general lack of concern for their personal issues. This led to lowered levels of morale, lack of trust, the creation of divisive thinking, and a reduced possibility of genuine team learning.

The important role of individuals was evident in the ICT project, as well. Individuals in the innovative schools felt empowered to champion the integration of ICT, whereas in static schools, and to a lesser extent in the moderately innovative schools, individuals had to seek the permission of the principal before taking action. In innovative schools, the primary sources of knowledge at the school level were the internal ICT leaders who shared knowledge that they had newly acquired from external sources. These individuals assisted others in early utilization of the new knowledge in the classroom. In schools where such individuals did not share the knowledge, implementation was limited to the individuals’ classrooms only. When these individuals departed the school, implementation stalled.

We have considerable empirical evidence to show that changing school practices depends largely on the level of organizational learning fostered by team leadership. As one compares the leadership in the most successful schools, it becomes readily apparent that, while both the formal structures and approaches to leadership vary, leadership in successful schools is perceived to be strong, collaborative, distributed, and focused on specific goals. Within the

Continued on page 31



The low signal power of the station meant we could not pick up the station in much of our community. Students spoke of kitchen parties where parents and relatives gathered in houses with good reception or sat in trucks with better reception the week of their broadcast! Unfortunately, the community radio station is no longer on the air, a victim of competition for advertising dollars and its weak broadcast signal.

What would I change? For a single class, an hour is too long and weekly is too often. A fifteen-minute segment every week or two would be manageable for most classes. Students would receive all the benefits without the stress of a much longer program. Webcasts offer another option, giving students outside the range of the radio signal – anywhere in the world – an opportunity to listen on the Internet and opening the door to international collaboration, which I may pursue this year in my new role as Technology Integration Teacher Leader.

SURF'S UP! was a unique opportunity to learn along with my students in an exciting, curriculum-rich project. Go ahead – give it a try! 🌟

Nancy Barkhouse has taught for 30 years and received a Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2002. She is currently leading Atlantic View Elementary's Network of Innovative Schools project while seconded to the Halifax Regional School Board as a Technology Integration Teacher Leader.

context of team leadership, however, it is essential that at least one leader, preferably the principal, is recognized and accepted by others as a champion for a change initiative. As a result of the critical importance of leadership, we concluded that external interventions, while not an adequate stimulant for successful change, may be necessary in schools where no one fosters team leadership or organizational learning. Our findings suggest, as well, that an essential component of successful organizational learning is the establishment of an action research process that holds individuals and the organization accountable for accomplishing the articulated goals to move the organization toward a vision that is genuinely shared by those who have been identified as a school's constituents.

While there is still much to learn about developing successful schools, the lessons presented in this article are well supported through a growing body of empirical research worldwide. Organizational learning is a means to developing successful schools, but it will not occur by simply stating that we want it to be so. Similarly, good schools will not be created by political mandates, nor by ill conceived, simplistic solutions, such as back-to-basics, standardized testing, teacher assessment, or accountability models. On that account, legislators might be wise to heed advice given by Philip Schlechty, "Stop trying to solve the problems that educators need to solve."⁸ Organizational learning theory can provide us with a useful framework for greater accountability, improved teaching, increased commitment to school improvement, better teachers, improved student achievement scores, and improved learning, and it will help us deal with emerging problems of teacher supply as we re-professionalize rather than demoralize teachers.

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces (Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 2) 🌟

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Dr. Bruce Sheppard is currently Director of Education and Chief Executive Officer for Avalon West School Board and adjunct professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Prior to his current appointment, he served as Associate Dean of Graduate Programmes and Research in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. His research interests include educational leadership, educational change, school improvement, organizational learning in educational settings, program implementation, and effective schooling in telelearning environments. Among his most recent accomplishments, Dr. Sheppard has been awarded the 2002 CEA-Whitworth Award for research and scholarship in Canada. sheppardb@awsb.ca