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EAD 825 – Final Personal Shared Leadership Challenge
December 7, 2011

PART I: (November 14, 2011)

I work in a large suburban district located ten minutes outside of Portland, Oregon. There are five, large comprehensive high schools, five option program high schools, twelve middle schools, and somewhere around thirty elementary schools. There is a diverse demographic of students which the district serves, and these demographics vary greatly among the high schools. The school where I currently work is 47% free and reduced lunch, yet a school about four miles down the road is 15% free and reduced. Because of these huge discrepancies within the district, over the last four or five years, we have begun to implement a proficiency-based assessment model (which we're now calling a standards-based learning system because "proficiencies" came to have a negative connotation). This work started at the middle school level with common learning targets and assessments among all content areas, and while the middle schools were finishing up their district work, pockets of high school teachers started to implement this model in their classrooms. The only directive from the district administration was that this work would someday be mandatory for all teachers, but there was no real timeline, and it was up to teachers how they wanted to begin this work in their specific schools and classrooms. This led to many different ideas and strategies about how this work was best implemented. Some schools had whole departments on board, while others had only a handful of teachers. Many building administrators did not understand the work, let alone how to articulate the model to parents and other teachers who were initially resistant to the changes.

Five years ago, a small group of about ten teachers from around the district (from all content areas) came together to discuss how a proficiency model could work on a large scale within our district and in all content areas. They spent a year discussing possibilities and looking at other districts that had begun to implement similar models. That same year, an option school opened in our district and they decided to be the first school to fully implement PBA (proficiency-based assessment). They became a guide for other schools and started to lead the way. The next year, more teachers were added to the original group. These teachers volunteered for the work, mainly because many of them were already trying this model within their own classrooms. Three years ago, the district decided to create content area groups to work on high school learning targets. The Language Arts group developed learning targets for reading, writing, and speaking that were shared among schools, though it was still up to individual teachers to decide whether or not they wanted to "take the plunge" and begin using a proficiency model of assessment. After that year, it was mandated that "at some point" the district would require teachers to use this model and these targets, though no exact deadline was determined. For the next couple of years, the same group met (me included) to refine and evaluate the use of the targets. They were revised, rubrics were made, and common assessments were developed based on the targets. This year, Nike stepped up to give us a grant to continue the work with the understanding that a set of targets and rubrics would be created that all teachers would begin to use in the fall of 2012.

The core group of teachers that has been working on these targets is still intact with some additions this year. There are about twenty-five of us who come together each month to work on developing the targets and putting them into practice to make sure they work on a practical level. For the most part, these are teachers whom I respect as colleagues, and many of them are friends. We are progressive thinkers who usually work well together in the interest of raising student achievement. We all believe in and are passionate about this work and want to see our colleagues at the building level embrace the

philosophical shift we are asking them to make. Many already have. At the end of last year, we had pretty much developed and solidified our reading and speaking/listening targets, but there was a philosophical debate with the writing targets. About half of our group wanted to see learning targets for freshman and sophomores focus more on the parts of writing (thesis statement, pieces of body paragraphs, introductions, and conclusions), while the other half of the group believed that the targets should center around writing traits (ideas/content, organization, etc.). We had at least three meetings last year that focused on teachers trying to convince the others why their way was “better.” The conversations were always the same, and frustration started to grow. Our shared purpose has always been at the forefront of our work, but we each have different ways of how to achieve our goals. A huge divide was created because of the interactions between members of the group who were passionate about the way they believed these targets should be articulated.

After a summer/cooling off period, our group came together once again to finalize our targets and rubrics, and we were told that these targets needed to be completed by March 2012 so that we could run a staff development day to teach all of the English teachers in the district how to use the new assessment model. Our first meeting of the year in October was completely unproductive. We fell right into the same conversation on which we ended the previous year. Half of the teachers wanted to write targets for writing parts, and the other half wanted writing traits. During our second meeting in November, we decided to completely avoid the subject and focus on how we were going to relay our information at the March staff development day. After that meeting, our “leader,” Melissa, who happens to be a colleague of mine at my school, came to me to help her plan our next meeting, which is to take place in mid-December, right before our winter break. Melissa told me she wanted help facilitating the conversation surrounding the writing targets with the goal that we would hammer out these targets by the end of the day of the meeting. At first I was a bit skeptical, and then I read about the project that we had to do for this class and realized it would be the perfect shared leadership challenge. Not only is this a challenge, but it is true shared leadership in the sense that not one person is really in charge. We all have a common purpose and interest in the work we are doing, and we are all striving to do what is best for our students. The problem is, we all have differing opinions about what the best way to reach our students may be.

After a week or so of thought about the issue, I realized the plan of action we take must be deliberate and inclusive. We need to come to some sort of compromise, which, in my mind, means thinking outside of the box and incorporating the goals of both parties. I think the first course of action we need to take is asking people to express their doubts. As Block (2009) writes, “A critical task of leadership is to protect space for the expression of people’s doubts” (p. 131). We need to give group members a voice to express why they may doubt the opposite argument. I believe this is something that could be accomplished over an email. I think we should send an email asking specifically for feedback about why people doubt the other side of the issue. This would give us a perspective about what issues are really at play in the decisions being made. Once we have this information, we can move to creating a vision around these targets, or, as Block claims, having a possibility conversation. Block again writes, “The future is created through a declaration of what is the possibility we stand for. Out of this declaration, each time we enter a room, the possibility enters with us” (p. 123). In determining the possibilities of the work we are doing, we may come to a solution or “possibility” that no one has even thought of. One of the problems in the past has been the demographics of the students we all teach. Some teachers come in contact with only high achieving students and some teacher only teach students who continually struggle to reach academic success. We need to look at the larger picture and determine what is best for *all* students, not just *our* students.

Once we have a discussion surrounding possibilities, we then need to focus on powerful questions. As Block also writes, “Conversations that evoke accountability and commitment can best be produced through deciding to value *questions* more than answers, by choosing to put as much thought into questions as we have traditionally given to answers” (p. 103). A couple of questions we need to ask would be: What is your commitment to this work? What is the value you place on the development and completion of these targets? Most of the teachers in the group already have strong relationships, though there are a couple that I know feels as though their voice is not heard or valued. By giving all community members a voice in answering the powerful questions, I feel as though these teachers who feel like they are on the fringe will begin to understand that they are part of the group and they have a valuable contribution to make. After everyone answers the questions and a discussion has taken place, I think the next step is to present some options to the group. These options can be a combination of both targets that teachers want to incorporate, or it could be something completely different. If we can come up with two sets of targets to give to the group to assess and revise, it may start the ball rolling in a completely different direction. Once they have revised the targets, the group can start working on the rubrics that go along with specific targets. That way, each member of the group feels as though they are contributing to the overall outcome of the finished targets, yet the conversation about parts versus traits never has to take place. I envision this working because I think most of the community members are fed up about talking this issue to death, and they just want to move forward. As I said before, we all value and respect the commitment to the work and the passion that each teacher brings, but at some point, a decision needs to be made in order to move the work ahead. There is also an understanding that this work is fluid and never really complete. There will always be revisions and evaluations of the practicality of the targets.

At the end of our day-long meeting, we will fill out feedback forms that ask for anonymous information from each member. I believe we should ask questions about the value that each member places on the work that was completed during the day. I also think it would be interesting to give a feedback form, like the SBI Effective Observation Form, to group members at the beginning of the day to record some of their feedback during the meeting. I would then like to take this information, compile it anonymously and send it out to the entire group for everyone to see what others’ perceptions really are. Although, on second thought, this could be a dangerous bit of information. Maybe I would have group members share some of their feedback with others in the group as a closing activity. At the very least, this will be a start of some productive communication in order to achieve our March deadline.

PART II: (December 7, 2011)

Planning the Agenda:

A couple of weeks ago, my colleague, Melissa, and I sat down to develop the agenda for our upcoming December 7th meeting. We started out drafting our meeting targets, or what we would hope to be the outcomes of our day-long meeting. Of course, our most necessary outcome was to complete our writing targets and to begin drafting rubrics for those targets. We did not want to focus the entire day around the writing targets, so the following was our final agenda.

Language Arts Articulation – Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Meeting Targets

Target 1: We can explain Essential Skills and how the Local Option hopes to address these.

Target 2: We can align reading and speaking/listening targets to CCSS and Essential Skills

Target 3: We can complete the work of writing learning targets and begin to draft rubrics.

Agenda

8:00am	Welcome/Revisit Community Agreements
8:15am	Action Plan for 2011-2012
8:45am	Essential Skills and Local Option Explanation
9:00am	Align Reading Targets and Refine Rubrics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do the targets we currently have align to the Essential Skills?• Can we say that a student who meets all of these targets can read at an appropriate level?
10:00am	Break
10:15am	Writing Targets (Powerful Questions & Tuning Protocol)
11:30am	Lunch
12:30pm	Writing Targets/Rubrics (cont.)
2:30pm	Next Steps/Feedback forms

We figured we would start our day off reviewing and revisiting the community agreements we developed at the beginning of the year just so they were fresh in everyone's mind. We then moved to basic meeting agenda items, like our local option explanation because it was just a chance for everyone to ease into the day's work. We then decided to start with our reading targets that we had already developed because they were targets that came so easily to all of us. We felt as though starting our proficiency work with positive reminders of what we have already accomplished would be better than just starting in on a topic that has usually been contentious. We did not want to simply review these reading targets, but instead we wanted to see that they aligned to the national standards and then we would spend some time revising and refining the rubrics for grades nine through twelve. Again, with this work complete, Melissa and I felt it would give the group a sense of accomplishment and a good energy moving into the writing targets. We then chose to spend the bulk of the day with the writing targets. Instead of jumping right into the same conversations we have been having the last year or so, we decided to write up our own set of writing targets (these targets have been attached to the end of this paper) taking bits and pieces from both sides of the argument and coming up with a compromise that we would present to the group during the tuning protocol portion. Before we started the tuning protocol, I wanted to be sure that everyone had a voice to express their opinions and desired outcomes for the group and the writing targets. We sent out the following powerful questions in an email to the group about a week before the meeting so that people would have a chance to think of a response before the meeting:

- What is the value you place on the completion of these writing targets?
- What skills/assets do you bring to the group that will help move the work forward?
- What is it about a compromise with these writing targets that makes you feel anxious or uncertain?

As our agenda indicates, after the powerful questions session and the tuning protocol, we would break for lunch so everyone would have a chance to debrief with their groups of friends or colleagues and then we would come back together to actually revise and refine the targets Melissa and I handed out before lunch. We are definitely going to want to make sure to tell the group that the writing targets we developed are just a starting point and not necessarily the end product. We need to be open to changes and suggestions, though we also need to be vigilant in not letting the group head down the same path as before. At the end of the day, depending on the work we accomplish, we will decide what our next steps at our January meeting will be. Finally, we will have each group participant fill out a feedback form, which we will then take back to the district office to evaluate the groups' responses.

The Day of the Meeting:

Our meeting overall went extremely well. I am actually happy to report that the meeting went even better than I expected. I'm not sure if the group members were also tired of having the same argument, but there was only one small disagreement throughout the entire day, which is almost unheard of for us. The activities and information we had planned for the morning went smoothly, and then when we transitioned to the proficiency work, there was an obvious up-tick in the energy of the group. It seemed as though people were ready to dive into the targets and rubrics and get some work done. We spent about an hour on the reading targets. We aligned them to the essential skills and played the semantics game with some of the wording (since it's what English teachers like to do).

We then took a short break, and when we came back, I had the powerful questions up on the projector from the email I sent last week. I explained to them that I was sure we could all agree that some of our conversations in the past needed to shift gears, so in order to do that, I wanted them to think about how they would honestly answer the powerful questions. I also explained to the group that, per our community agreements we discussed first thing that morning, everyone's voice would be heard, and no one could comment on someone else's answers. As I said in my first paper, for the most part the teachers in this group get along well and are pretty comfortable with one another. In fact, I think one of the problems of this group might be that people are so comfortable with one another that sometimes they forget that we are working in a professional setting, so the respect or professional demeanor of the group is sometimes compromised.

We went around in a circle and each person had a chance to answer the questions. After everyone had spoken, I just said that it was important that we keep each other in mind as we proceed through the work. We all placed a high value on the proficiency work and what it means for student achievement, and we all bring different skills to see this work through. We may have differences on how we achieve the end result of our work, but ultimately no one is out to sabotage anything. The one piece that kept being repeated was that members of the group were anxious about compromise because it would mean they would have to change what they have been doing the last couple of years, yet again, which is a legitimate concern. I asked everyone to keep the powerful questions in mind throughout the day and reflect on their answers as well as other group members' responses.

After our discussion surrounding the powerful questions, we then moved to the tuning protocol in order to present the writing targets that Melissa and I had written to start the group off fresh. We showed the group what the tuning protocol is and explained the rationale behind the time constraints. There was a brief introduction, then we presented the targets and gave each group member a copy, we had five minutes for clarifying questions, and then we gave everyone about fifteen minutes to work in small groups to look at the targets and write warm and cool feedback. Each group then presented their feedback to the group, and most of the feedback was warm. We were able to make a few minor adjustments to the targets, and everyone seemed almost pleased that others had done the work and there was no conversation or disagreement to be had. At one point, someone made a comment that started to lead to a conversation that was all too familiar to us, and when someone pointed it out, the person stopped what she was saying and we moved on. I was really impressed with how well the tuning protocol worked today.

After lunch, we came back together as a group to continue to work on the writing targets and begin to develop the rubrics that went along with the targets. Each small group decided to take on a target and develop the rubrics from highly proficient to working toward and from ninth through twelfth grade. This was probably the most productive meeting day we have had since I've started working with this group. We not only accomplished all of our meeting targets, but we were able to set ourselves up to be in a good position when we meet in January. We now know exactly what we need to do, we have moved past our one difference, and now we are just about ready to implement this work in all buildings and classrooms.

Reflection and Analysis

After such a successful meeting, I'm starting to wonder if the challenge I had originally thought of as being the fact that two groups could not decide on a compromise for writing targets was actually the challenge. Instead, I'm starting to believe that the challenge lay within the leadership of the group. As it turns out, it was not that the group did not want to compromise; we had just never had someone give us another option. I'm also not suggesting that our previous leadership was ineffective, because in many respects, they were great, but one of the formal leaders was not an English teacher, so it would have been a struggle for him to come up with different options. Therefore, it seems as though people who develop cadres and committees should be extremely careful whom they put into the leadership position in order to ensure the group's success.

In terms of the powerful questions, I actually chose not to ask "What is your commitment to this work?," as I had originally planned because I felt as though the question itself was challenging the level of commitment of the group members, which was not something I wanted to do. I know very well that all of these members are passionate about the work we are doing, and I would never challenge that fact. Therefore, my goal with the powerful questions was to shift the thinking a little bit to a different direction. Hearing all of the responses to the questions opened many of our eyes to the thoughts of some members of the group who don't share or participate as much as some others. I still struggle to come up with really good powerful questions. I know with time and practice, like everything else, these questions will come more easily, though a positive aspect of powerful questioning is that it forces me to

really think about what I want to come from my meetings or interactions with my peers. It also holds me accountable to answering the questions myself and really reflecting on the work I do and why I do it.

The tuning protocol was also an invaluable tool to move the conversation forward. *The Power of Protocols* states that protocols are used to, “deliberately constrain participation in order to heighten it” (McDonald, 2007). It is an interesting concept to think that giving people guidelines and time constraints during an exercise would actually prove more fruitful than just letting people talk. The tuning protocol really allowed group members to engage in the activity and only focus on giving the warm and cool feedback – not necessarily pointing out what they thought was “wrong” with the targets or what would never work in a classroom. There was no room for cynicism and pessimism, which are traits that usually come about during these meetings, and the tuning protocol was able to stifle these past problems.

I am pretty sure there were teachers in the group that figured we would never move past this one issue. In fact, there are teachers who have decided after a couple of years to leave the group because of this one problem. They felt as though the group was not progressing, and out of frustration, they opted out instead of trying to work toward finding a solution. One of the greatest lessons I learned from this class and from this leadership challenge was that there is always a solution, and a leader, whether formal or informal, cannot just sit back and let the conversation stagnate. Someone has to step in to get things moving again.

Overall, Gordon Donaldson is spot on. Relationships are the key to effective leadership and developing and implementing effective programs to increase student achievement. Without positive and strong relationships among colleagues and other staff members, neither protocols nor any other tools would be successful in achieving particular outcomes. Donaldson and Block have both taught me to pay more attention to the interactions I have with the people whom I work, and I need to be more deliberate in my questions to my peers in order to build on my relationships and create a greater sense of community in my building.

References

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McDonald, J. P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E. C. (2007). *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Teacher's College Press.