

## Educational Leaders as Sherpas: How Leaders' Actions Promote Collective Teachers' Efficacy

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### ABSTRACT

Educational leaders continually search for effective practices to improve schools. A quantitative study was conducted to determine what transformative behaviors a leader could use to improve collective teacher efficacy at the level of the entire faculty and at the level of grade level teams. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways a leader could use the inverse relationship between transformational leadership and collective teacher efficacy to create higher levels of collective teacher efficacy in a school as a means to enhance performance. The Collective Efficacy Scale (Goddard, 2001) was modified to measure the perceptions of teachers at both levels; entire faculty's collective efficacy and the collective efficacy of their team. Thus, this article also provides leaders with important information regarding teaming within schools. The significant difference found between collective teacher efficacy at the level of school and team, provides important information for leaders to consider as they support various professional learning teams. Success for all would be promoted as leaders increase efficacy within teams by employing the concepts of developing leadership teams and purposeful learning communities (Hill & Lundquist, 2008).

**Keywords:** transformational leadership, collective teacher efficacy, school improvement, teaming

The White Mountains of New Hampshire have lured avid hikers in the northeast for over a century; not because they are the highest in the country, but because they provide some of the greatest challenges. Groups ascend the high peaks for the exhilaration that comes from breaking tree-line, the personal satisfaction of summiting a high peak through perseverance, and the camaraderie that comes from sharing the hike with friends or being guided by an expert to a new height. A safe journey is never a guarantee. Planning is essential for a successful group ascent to the high peak and safe journey down the mountain. Similarly, leaders who know the route to improve collective teacher efficacy, like successful hiking ventures, can guide faculty and teams within his or her school to improve student achievement. Research shows collective teacher efficacy has a positive effect on student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, 2001; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard, LeGerfo, & Hoy, 2004). Therefore, school improvement can be promoted by raising the level of collective teacher efficacy. A Connecticut study (Prelli, 2007) of seventeen elementary schools, surveying ninety-three teams of teachers, showed that when the perceived collective teacher efficacy of a school was *high*, teachers perceived their leaders to employ transformative leadership behaviors less frequently. Using the Nature of Leadership Scale (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1995), the five categories that showed a significant correlation with perceived collective efficacy at the school and team levels were: Models behaviors, builds a strong culture, develops a shared vision, builds consensus to goals and provides individual support. Yet, when perceived collective teacher efficacy was *low*, higher levels of these transformative leadership behaviors were reported.

The Collective Efficacy Scale (Goddard, 2002) was modified and used to assess the extent to which a faculty, and teams within a school, believed they had the capability to positively affect student performance. The study showed differences between the means of the teachers' perceptions at the grade level team and the teachers' perceptions of the teachers' collective efficacy at the school level. This is important for leaders to note since it suggested that whether or not the overall collective efficacy of his or her school is high, it may not be the case for *all* teams within the school.

### **Why is Collective Teacher Efficacy Important?**

First, if a leader knows the perceived collective teacher efficacy of his or her school and the teams within the school, the leader would use that information to inform action. If the perceived collective teacher efficacy is *high*, a leader would be more facilitative, using empowerment techniques, encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles. Yet, if the perceived collective efficacy is *low*, the leader would employ transformative leadership: Direct modeling, developing a shared vision, building consensus to goals and providing individual support as a way to promote higher levels of collective efficacy.

Secondly, a leader could promote higher collective efficacy in his or her school by providing sources of collective efficacy. These include: Mastery experiences, vicarious experience, social persuasion, affective states, and analysis of teaching task and assessment of teaching competence (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000).

### ***Mastery Experiences***

Collective efficacy is enhanced by the success of the teams. Leaders recognizing the power of a successful climb would choose a less strenuous hike with a great view, or select a trail that begins at a higher starting elevation, and build toward the highest peak, using incremental successes. Other leaders recognize the talents of the faculty and take on the challenge of the highest peak with the most unpredictable weather. Proper preparation, encouragement, training and practice are all essential. One successful ascent on a clear day resulting in endless views makes the leader's job easier. An essential component is success: The entire faculty, each team, needs to meet success.

### ***Vicarious Experience***

A leader ignites passion, motivating the group to be willing to take on the challenge, by highlighting powerful experiences and successes of others. Prior to the first successful ascent and safe return down the mountain, the leader uses stories and successes of others to motivate, encourage, and gain consensus to attempt the challenge. Videos, pictures and stories of other hiking groups' experiences can serve as prompts. A leader would encourage faculty to share a picture of the view from the top, talk about the exhilaration that comes from breaking tree-line as a way to persuade the group.

### ***Social Persuasion***

Stories become infectious. It is difficult to be in the White Mountains and listen to exhilarated hikers share their stories and not want to put on boots. A leader shares the stories of the successes and challenges experienced. In schools, leaders need to help everyone keep their eye on the target of improving student achievement. Talking about and encouraging others to talk about the magnificent feeling of adding a rock to the cairn at the highest point on the mountain can be very motivational. Keep the pictures in places the faculty and teams can see and talk about every day. Remind teams and individuals of the importance of the feat accomplished. Keep articulating the common goal and moral purpose. Provide opportunities during faculty meetings for teams to share their successes.

It is most difficult to set foot on trail when the clouds are looming or rain is falling. The true test of leadership is to motivate the teams to get their boots on the trail no matter the prevailing conditions. Leaders would share stories of rainbows seen at the end of the storm as additional motivation, reminding the group that difficulties are opportunities to test and prove their abilities. Facilitate discussions of past experiences surmounting challenges and improving academic performance. Use the successes of teams to encourage other teams.

### ***Affective States***

Teams as well as entire faculties develop higher levels of perceived collective efficacy through the relationships that help move the group to the goal. Trust is essential. When a team member offers a hand to pull a peer up a huge rock, trust has to exist before a hand is extended. The commitment to not letting your team down is an affective state that encourages members to put forth their best effort when relationships exist. Leaders who gain the respect and admiration of their faculty and teams are able to encourage members to establish higher goals. The leader that has hiked will find encouraging the faculty to hike Mount Washington an easier task than the leader that has never stepped foot on a trail. Respect, admiration, appreciation, and trust all support the development of collective efficacy. Teams recognize and appreciate the support provided when necessary whether it is from the principal or leader in the team. This contributes to an affective state of commitment. Teams that have shared success, and see members supporting individuals to success are more willing to take risks, set higher goals and challenge themselves. Climbing a mountain with a team member with proven ability as a climber, provides impetus for individual members of the group to suggest setting higher goals; a higher peak, more difficult trail or other challenge. Yet, if teams are uncertain of the expertise within their group or do not see the leader as a strong guide, the goals are often based on safety and survival.

### ***Analysis of Teaching Task and Assessment of Teaching Competence***

The itinerary developed during the planning of the journey to the goal is detailed and denotes the trail the groups will take, the time it should take, and mile-markers to help the teams recognize they are on the right track. These benchmarks become immediate feedback, giving the team knowledge of their progress. Suggested time increments support success in summiting the mountains so the teams can analyze their progress toward the goal. Along the way, groups can evaluate their progress by comparing their time to the suggested time given by experts. Discussion about progress by the team members provides an opportunity for promoting collective teacher efficacy. Noting the distance traveled, compared with the distance remaining, can be an incentive and opportunity for making adjustments. Just as data teams meet to discuss the progress of students, the benchmarks provide a means for analyzing success. Teams tracking the progress of students use this same monitoring to support peers within their team, sharing ideas to ensure improved student achievement.

### ***Implications for Leaders***

The implications for the school leader, in an attempt to raise the collective efficacy of the faculty as a means to improve student learning, would be to provide clear feedback, emphasize successes and focus faculty members on the goal of improving student achievement. Realizing the collective efficacy of teams may be different from the collective teacher efficacy of the school, a leader would decide the degree to which to employ specific action with various groups or faculty as a whole. The mountain guide has to know the needs of the group before determining the additional supports necessary to ensure success.

Hiking in New Hampshire, like teaching, comes with extreme variables. The climate in the White Mountains is unpredictable and you can find freezing temperatures at the summit of

Mount Washington all twelve months of the year. The best plans and detailed itinerary often require revision. One clap of thunder, hurricane force wind gusts, an injury to a member of the party, or trail erosion, all require an immediate response. Variables in schools can be equally challenging. Knowledge, experience, preparation and planning all contribute to the success or failure. Leaders recognizing the power or benefit of perceived high collective teacher efficacy have an opportunity to ensure more successes. Just as the weather in the mountains can change in an instant so can perceived levels of collective efficacy. It is prudent for leaders to attend to shifts in the levels of efficacy. Poor test scores, community criticism of the school, an editorial in the local newspaper, can shift the balance of collective efficacy quickly.

Leaders who recognize that the perceived collective teacher efficacy of the entire faculty differs from the perceived level of collective teacher efficacy of individual teams can target behaviors that support everyone. Understanding that the faculty ascending the mountain is only as strong as the weakest team is critical. The responsive leader needs to focus on every team as well as the group as a whole. It is not enough to have experienced leaders or a few capable hikers to successfully summit a mountain over 6000 feet. Success comes only if every member of the team has the will, determination, and ability to endure the physical and mental challenge. The group must have the training, resources and be ready to intentionally respond to unforeseen circumstances. Team members who are prepared to assume greater responsibility offer more support and encouragement during the more difficult ascents, adding to the success of the entire faculty.

### **Leadership Behaviors that Promote Collective Teacher Efficacy**

Responsive leaders determine how best to utilize the resources in the school to promote academic gains. They encourage teams to track their successes and offer feedback on progress toward the goal. Challenges are afforded to teams to take on leadership responsibilities or professional development may be necessary to get a team back on trail. Leaders create bridges of communication between teams encouraging sharing of successful interventions or ideas resulting in everyone climbing the trail to high achievement for all.

Ascending a peak of over 6000 feet requires physical stamina, mental determination and conviction. Although some hikers have this quest and take it on as a personal challenge, how does one encourage others to embrace the opportunity? Long before stepping foot on a trail, each member of the group has to have some desire to climb and summit the mountain, knowing the risks. The goal and expectations need to be stated clearly with the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities identified. A leader facilitates collaborative decisions on choice of trail, time of departure, parameters for time, as well as distribution of responsibilities. Collaboratively designing a common vision with clear goals on how to accomplish the vision is essential with details to ensure every individual is successful.

Leaders and teachers need to know and be prepared to successfully implement the plan as well as be prepared to make adjustments when a challenge arises. Highly efficacious teams believe they can implement a well developed plan to address the needs of every student and rely on members or leaders of their team to support or assist in surmounting obstacles. The mountain guide needs to know if all teams have this capacity and are ready for any situation before taking the first step on trail, and provide the direction and support for any team less efficacious.

Mount Washington offers at least seven alternate routes to the summit, and teams may benefit by choice. The goal or outcomes remain the same, but the route to the top may be very different. Some teams may be able to handle the shortest route to the summit, going straight

up, while others need the longer, windier trail, giving respite with a more gradual pitch. Ultimately, a mountain guide wants the experience to be positive for all, so as to encourage the teams and the entire faculty to be motivated to repeat the challenge and even set a higher goal. Leaders use knowledge of his or her faculty's expertise in selecting the best route for success.

A leader works to keep everyone moving up the trail, reminding the group of the goals, the importance of their actions, and reminding teams of the magnificent view awaiting their efforts. Sometimes a leader needs to remind a group to savor the moment at hand, appreciate the challenge afforded to test group stamina, or celebrate the academic gains made thus far. Some trails provide handholds and bridges, while other trails require treacherous stream crossings and precarious footing. The skillful leader provides just the right level of support to meet the needs of the team, including helping them to select a trail that will ensure success.

### SUMMARY

Leaders are in a position to help move all groups up the mountain. The successful leader creates a community of hikers that are self-supporting, self-renewing, and self-motivating with members of the team helping and supporting each other. A few successful trips to the summit, recognition by teams that they can handle challenge and the exhilaration of success become motivational and enhance perceived collective efficacy. The faculty who believes they can move all students to academic success achieves this goal. They summit the highest peaks and meet success. Leaders facilitating higher levels of collective efficacy of every team within the faculty improve schools. These are self-renewing organizations ready to take on an even higher challenge and move onto a harder trail, higher mountain, and ready to face any challenge. The consistent inverse relationship between the behaviors of the leaders and collective teacher efficacy seen in the Connecticut study provides direction to leaders. Being cognizant of this correlation between a mountain climbing excursion and educational teams' efficacy led by dynamic leadership is the key to moving theory to action. Mountain guides determine the trail for success based on the ability of the hiker, just as leader's actions are informed by the levels of collective teacher efficacy of his or her faculty and teams.

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