Thirteen Steps to Teacher Empowerment
Taking a More Active Role in Your School Community

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Introduction: Leadership as Everyday Participation in Your School’s Professional Community

Jill’s Story

Jill, a fourth-year French teacher, garnered rave reviews from her supervisors for her teaching during her internship and was accordingly offered a teaching position at a prestigious high school in a prosperous suburb. Because of the parents’ affluence, the school was shielded from many of the excesses of No Child Left Behind, including the preoccupation with test scores. Jill could not wait to use her best-practice communicative language teaching skills with the highly motivated students. Jill’s department chair, however, was one of the few left from the “old school.” She had no patience with Jill’s Total Physical Response instructional methods and insisted that Jill stick to the textbook, drilling students on grammar rules and vocabulary.

Jill felt more and more isolated, despite the many great teachers in other departments throughout the high school, and her students, sensing that she was not teaching what she believed in, lost faith in her, too. When Jill’s chair observed her in the spring, she criticized her for her lack of classroom management, and not surprisingly, Jill was told that she would not be asked back. We wondered: Might Jill have survived and prospered if she had developed some basic skills for connecting with other more supportive teachers? Sybil shows how this can happen.
Sybil’s Story

Sybil, a chemistry teacher who graduated with Jill from the same preservice program, faced her own daunting trial when starting her career. She went straight to an urban high school with a population of high-poverty students, where the chair told her that even though she was by far the most proficient chemist at the school, she would have to teach physics, a field for which she was much less prepared. When she complained, her chair told her that her students wouldn’t know the difference anyway because most of them would be lucky just to graduate from high school.

Though disappointed, Sybil approached a well-prepared physics teacher who taught during Sybil’s prep period and asked about sitting in on the physics class for a term. She figured this was the best way to learn to teach physics under the circumstances. Sybil said, “I’ll never be as good as this teacher is at teaching physics, because she has a passion for the field, but I learned a lot from her, and I don’t feel bad because she’ll never be as good as me at teaching chemistry.”

Sybil also attended local teacher support groups in chemistry and physics and met university faculty members who helped her and her colleagues with innovative lessons and labs. She urged her most effective colleagues to stay at the school to help improve it, including an assistant principal who was offered a very attractive job elsewhere. She joined the technology committee, giving her access to new equipment and software, and volunteered to counsel the student peer mentoring committee, which helped her get to know her students.

Eventually, Sybil won the right to teach honors chemistry and started the very first Advanced Placement chemistry class at the school. Although still an untenured teacher and disliked—and perhaps envied—by her chair, she is admired by her colleagues and her principal. Sybil has developed a great reputation and has won grants and citywide awards, so the chair would not dare to terminate her contract. Unlike Jill, she loves her job and feels very supported at the school by many of her colleagues.

So What Do These Stories Tell Us About the Power Teachers Can Generate?

What is the difference between Jill’s and Sybil’s approaches? Jill thought that if she focused on being an excellent teacher—certainly a tough job by itself—it would be enough for her to succeed. By the middle of the year, however, Jill
seemed to be burning out, even though she was still trying as often as possible to teach in the way she believed was most effective.

Sybil, on the other hand, has become even more enthusiastic about her mission because she treats her school as more than a collection of individual classrooms. Schools are complex organizations, in which our roles are determined not just by our training and expertise but also by many factors over which we do not have full control. However, we can achieve some influence over these factors, and by using this influence, we can not only become more effective in our classrooms but also help improve the entire school and feel much more job satisfaction—all without necessarily taking on formal leadership roles or becoming principals or superintendents.

This book, then, is about extending one’s professional role in small ways and large in the school community, in order to improve one’s teaching, one’s work life, and the school as a whole—and that is what we mean by teacher empowerment and teacher leadership.

Does It Make a Difference?

We don’t want to bore you with a long review of the research, but it is important to know that if you try some of the steps recommended in this book, it will make a difference for you, your kids, and the school. Here are some of the effects that have been observed:

- Distributing teacher leadership increases teacher effectiveness and student engagement (Leithwood and Jantzi 2000; Silins and Mulford 2002).

- Every Chicago small school that has improved student achievement shares all of the following features: (1) teachers work together regularly on common instructional issues; (2) the principal is deeply involved in initiating and supporting this work; and (3) teachers have influence on school policy and decision making (Stevens 2008).

- The extensive study The Essential Supports for School Improvement, by Penny Sebring and associates at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2006), identified five characteristics of Chicago schools with the most improved test scores. One is leadership that includes teacher involvement and is focused on instruction. A second is a professional community committed to instructional innovation and to the school. Of course, safety, strong curriculum, and parent involvement also matter. But schools improved most when all factors were present.
Contrary to popular belief, high teacher turnover is not so strongly related to working in high-poverty urban schools. Rather, limited input into school decision making is a major factor in teachers leaving their jobs, along with inadequate support from the school’s administration, low salary, and student discipline problems (Ingersoll 2001).

As we suggest in this book, however, teachers need not wait for administrators to hand them more responsibility in order to make their jobs more fulfilling. Rather, we want to show you some ways you can do this yourself. So now let’s define more explicitly what we mean by teacher leadership and teacher empowerment—and what we don’t mean.

Everyone in a Teaching Community Actually Leads

Building teacher power involves taking responsibility, and that means becoming a leader in one way or another. But because of the way leadership works in many organizations—not just schools but banks, hospitals, and factories—most of us think of leadership in terms of people making big decisions, giving orders, evaluating subordinates, and perhaps occasionally whacking someone who isn’t toeing the line. As a result, many teachers turn tail the moment they hear the word. Instead, we want to rethink the very idea of leadership to see how it can be something much more congenial and essential, a positive part of every professional life.

In fact, all of us exert leadership in one form or another all the time. It may be in a formal position or by way of informal relationships, influence with fellow teachers, or, very simply but importantly, by the example we set. Our actions always affect others and help set the tone of the school, and that is a type of leadership.

This kind of leadership may work positively or negatively. Maybe this doesn’t happen in your school, but many of us have seen it: Somebody proposes a new idea in a meeting, and the school curmudgeon, who has no official leadership position whatsoever, offers a dozen reasons why it’s no good. Everyone shuts down and the idea dies. That’s still leadership, but it’s negative leadership. Or there’s the opposite: A highly respected veteran takes a new teacher under his wing or quietly gathers support for a new program, helping it spread across the school. The principal knows that this person’s support can make all the difference in the success of a new program. That’s leadership, too. In both cases,
power derives not from any official authority, but from relationships, earned respect, and behavior patterns established over time.

Some education gurus use the term distributed leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility throughout a school. And it reminds us that other adults in the building besides the teachers are also models and resources. A recent National Public Radio story featured a school maintenance worker who is also a poet and mentors kids throughout the school. To do this effectively, he and the official teachers have to coordinate their efforts and consult each other thoroughly, so that the poetry work fits in with the rest of the instruction taking place at the school. At Washington Irving School in Chicago, it was long a practice for students to approach any adult in the building to hold a conversation about the book they were reading and get a sign-off for their reading record. Lunchroom cooks were as helpful as anyone else, and so they needed to become an active part of the decision making about this program, along with the faculty.

Leadership, then, means taking a more active and constructive role in the professional community and developing an authentic kind of power that legitimizes and strengthens this role. All of us contribute to the culture of the school in one way or another, whether we are outspoken or silent. But what we’re talking about is a more active and intentional approach to our role.

It’s not about who a person is but what he does.

A better way to think about teacher leadership, then, is to recognize that, as expert Linda Lambert says, “leadership and leader are not the same” (1998, 8). We usually think of these two as synonymous, as if leadership is the monopoly of someone with a specific set of personal traits or a formal position. In this view, leadership belongs to a powerful personality with organizational authority to back her up. Either you’ve got it or you don’t. But if, as Lambert explains, leadership is about thoughtful and strategic behaviors that help improve a school and increase kids’ learning, then we can all exercise greater leadership and do so more intentionally—and that’s the kind of leadership we’re talking about.

So any teacher can take important actions like setting an example, sharing ideas to solve a problem in the school, asking for help, and building relationships. Each of us can find ways to investigate students’ needs or try a new teaching strategy and share what we observe in a constructive and accessible way. If we do take on a more formal task, we can seek input and communicate about our work with as many colleagues as possible. Where conflicts or
disagreements arise, we can seek ways to resolve them constructively. But doing these things well requires skills, and that’s what we explore in this book.

One key element of such behavior is the building of trust. Much research suggests that schools don’t improve unless the teachers have some colleagues they can trust (Bryk and Schneider 2002), so establishing this trust where it does not yet exist is a major contribution that is at the core of teacher power and leadership. It’s a first step to entering more fully into the professional community. But this does not happen automatically. Teachers need to develop explicit communication skills—skills we can use, like how to sit down and find common ground with a colleague whose views of education differ from yours, or how to initiate a campaign for changing a school policy in a constructive way that is most likely to succeed. The challenges of educating today’s changing student population cannot be met by a teacher-proof curriculum or a building full of disconnected classrooms. Improving schools in a more significant and long-lasting fashion will require this kind of in-depth work on teachers’ part.

**What about the differences between formal and informal leadership roles?**

The number of formal positions for teachers has been increasing—including literacy and math coaches, lead teachers, and other coaching and mentoring positions. These have advantages and disadvantages. A coach has specific duties, time to do them, and perhaps some recognition for the work, but even if she just stepped out of the classroom a year or two earlier, teachers may see her as an outsider: “You don’t have to face these kids the way we do every day!” But strategies for informal leadership can especially help a coach or lead teacher overcome the limits that a formal position brings with it. So we believe that formal leadership requires the same kinds of skills and strategies as the informal kind, only more so.

**Individual or whole-school leadership?**

We’ve described teacher power so far as mostly an individual contribution to the teacher community. Yet it’s most powerful when the whole school embraces it. In a building where the principal promotes a professional community, the job of teaching is very naturally redefined to include responsibilities beyond the classroom (along with time and resources for them). Such a school has effective teams, well-designed professional learning, and processes that use teachers’ expertise to make wise decisions and get everyone behind them. This
makes it much easier for teachers to take on new roles and build leadership skills. Teacher power is something that grows; it’s not just conferred. School climate and organizational structures can make a huge difference in supporting or neglecting teachers’ wider roles, and we elaborate on this in the conclusion of this book.

_BUT . . ._ there are plenty of schools where it’s simply not happening. And there are more and more pressures from standardized tests, required goals, and lockstep curricula that appear to limit teachers’ individual initiative. Teachers can feel helpless and isolated when they’re under such pressures and lack real support. Sometimes they see their best efforts undermined by misguided mandates. Often, as a result, they withdraw into their classrooms and do the best they can. But that’s just not as much fun. Even in the least hospitable settings, when individuals take small actions to improve their own practice, connect with others, and open their classroom doors, their work lives and teaching can get better and better. Perhaps the whole school doesn’t change just yet. But teachers who are active and reach out discover a new sense of efficacy. They attract support from others who respond to their invitation. So, yes, a good school climate is important. But there’s plenty that can be done, even when that’s not perfect.

**OK, so I’ll be happier with my job if I exercise leadership. Is that it?**

Exercising power in a teacher community is not just about being happier with our jobs, as necessary as that is for our own well-being and for a school to be successful. And it’s not just about voting, or having a voice in decision making in a school, as important as those things may be. It’s certainly not about maintaining the status quo. Rather, it’s got to be about taking active responsibility—not just in your own classroom but also in the wider professional community of your school—for making learning deeper and more powerful for children. That’s our core focus. Otherwise, we’d be forgetting the essential purpose—and satisfaction—of our work.

**What This Book Invites You to Do**

The thirteen steps in this book offer a variety of ways in which you can expand your scope, build your leadership capacity, and participate more fully in the professional community of your school. Some steps are small and easy to take.
These build to larger, wider efforts that involve more planning and time. We encourage you to start with yourself. As you become progressively stronger and more knowledgeable in your work, you can move outward to learn more about your students, connect with colleagues, engage in the professional life of the school, and finally connect with and draw in resources from beyond your building.

Following is a summary of the steps you’ll find in this book.

**Start with yourself.**

In every profession—just as with ours—continually adding to one’s knowledge and capacity is part of the definition of what it means to be a professional. By starting with yourself, you increase your own confidence and develop more knowledge that you can share when it becomes appropriate. If you are exploring an idea or activity you are passionate about, not only will you be energized, but that will sooner or later communicate itself to your students and your colleagues. One of the challenges of teaching is that there’s no real career ladder, except for the one that takes you out of the classroom and into administrative and supervisory work. Therefore, if you intend to keep on teaching and working with kids every day, it’s especially important over time to keep developing new approaches to your teaching and your work life so you don’t grow stale or bored.

**Understand the kids more deeply.**

Developing teacher power and leadership is important for your classroom. Observing students and analyzing their work and their needs will of course make your teaching more effective. But when you begin to compare your observations with others’, or work together on a study of student performance, you will move into closer collaboration with colleagues, which in turn will result in still more productive and creative lessons. Further, you can apply with students many of the same strategies you use when working with colleagues. Our students need to learn leadership skills as well—essential social skills of democracy, group work, teaming, and civic engagement—so you’ll see an “In the Classroom” section in each chapter of this book. Finally, the kids will also learn from watching you, their role model, collaborate with fellow teachers and administrators.
Connect with fellow teachers.

Connecting with colleagues will enable you to avoid the isolation that can be so discouraging and limiting to the professional growth of individuals and the school. Strong relationships will make your work atmosphere more collegial and enjoyable. Even if your school harbors some apathetic or curmudgeonly people, you can still create a community where they have less influence over your work. Reaching out can be contagious. Teachers begin to help each other more, increasing the professional skills of the good ones and strengthening the weaker ones. More teachers will be working toward the same goals. If you’ve been feeling lonely doing high-quality, best-practice work, you can develop strategies for enlisting more support.

Take action in your building.

This means getting involved in a more intentional way—speaking out when that will help and initiating or contributing to efforts that can improve the school more widely. This matters both for you and for the school. For one thing, it’s good for your health and happiness. Even if not all your efforts succeed, you won’t feel helpless or victimized, so you’ll be less likely to burn out. You’ll achieve more of a sense of control over your work life and environment. And your involvement is needed for the school. If administrators are the only ones focused on school improvement, it’s never going to happen more than superficially. Once the present regime moves on, improvements will evaporate if not sustained by a collegial learning community. In contrast, when it spreads to the whole school, teacher power means that school improvement is more than the sum of individual efforts. The whole school culture can become a trusting environment to which all contribute. This in turn builds internal accountability, that is, people committed to doing a good job for the kids and for one another, as opposed to external accountability, which is about people monitoring you, and which is far less effective.

Reach outside.

When you reach out to people beyond the school building, you’ll have more resources to improve your students’ education and your school. Parents become partners instead of griping adversaries to be kept at bay. Grants enable you to develop new projects that excite you and your kids. Partnerships
with community organizations, businesses, or universities bring in specialized expertise and activities that both you and the students can learn from. Connecting with the wider community goes beyond just making use of its resources. A significant part of teacher leadership and power is coming to see yourself in a larger arena, a wider setting that includes not just your school and district but the community in which they exist. That community, and its social capital (or lack of it), has a lot to do with the conditions and character of your school, so you need to be in touch with it, work with it, and learn about it. And those parents and partners will in turn learn from you.

A New Professionalism

Teaching has always been a profession and not just a job. Whatever the rest of the world may think, the task of guiding students to conceive new ideas, understandings, and abilities is a complex one that, at its best, requires skill, experience, thought, artfulness, judgment, and many kinds of knowledge. But now, as it becomes clear that the external forces like No Child Left Behind are very limited in how much they can improve education in this country, the spotlight comes back to us, the teachers. In many schools and communities, kids really do need more than their schools have provided for them in the past. Yet we can’t achieve that only by bearing down harder in our own classrooms. It’s time for a new professionalism in which educators learn ways to work together more effectively. In some schools, they are already doing that, and we can all learn from them, as we will in this book.

At the same time, there’s also a personal side to this new professionalism. Building a professional community can encourage you and your colleagues to stay in teaching as a career because the job becomes more satisfying in all sorts of ways, including offering the potential of monetary rewards and recognition beyond your district. But even if these kinds of rewards don’t mean a lot to you, we hope the many teacher stories in this book will convince you that creating a warm and trusting professional community where the work you do is valued and respected repay many times over the efforts needed to develop this kind of workplace.
Hard Work, Low Pay, Scant Recognition

Good teachers know that making their classroom a great place for learning is job one, and it’s huge and exhausting. We readily admit that at our stage of life, we the authors probably couldn’t find the energy to do it! So then, who wants to take on more work and responsibility when we’re underpaid, underrecognized, and overworked already? Compared with higher-paid professions, even the best-salaried teachers are hardly paid what they’re really worth. Further, only a few school districts around the country actually have systems for fairly and constructively recognizing the higher levels of expertise and effort involved in teacher leadership. So it’s no surprise that many teachers hesitate to do more than meet the direct needs of their students and the requirements of their contract.

Getting Over It

When we asked Karen Sabaka at Telpochcalli School in Chicago what she gets out of her leadership work, she listed a number of benefits. First, she remarked that she needed help to improve her practice, and many of the activities she initiated addressed that, particularly in literacy and bilingual education. Second, she approached co-teaching as an opportunity rather than an external obligation. While she did provide suggestions to her new teacher partner, she also set up occasions when they brought their two classes together so each received help and ideas from the other. Lastly, she admitted, “My friends and I are nerdy! We love talking about our work. I realize that not everyone is like that.” At the same time, Karen realistically acknowledged that teachers who are raising young kids while guiding thirty more at school every day may not have the time that she does, so life stages can make a difference. So we show in this book how teachers can take small steps that contribute to their community and make their work lives more satisfying, even when major projects or big committee jobs are not within reach.
How It Helps You

We all know how to create relationships. We have close friends. We find fellow teachers we can talk with honestly about our victories and struggles. But what about faculty members with whom we are *not* well connected, perhaps because they work in a different department, grade level, or wing of the building, and we never see them? Perhaps they have philosophies of teaching different from our own, or their job simply involves a different focus and we end up competing for the same limited resources. Who wouldn’t like to have some skills for settling a conflict amicably, rather than seeing it escalate, turn bitter, and make going to work more stressful? And wouldn’t it be great not only to settle that conflict but to replace an unpleasant, combative pattern with an ongoing, trusting connection?

The most powerful tool for doing this important work is to have a discussion that can lead to a new or rebuilt professional relationship. This is a key step, as we shall see in many chapters of this book, for developing trust among colleagues, strengthening the school, and improving your work life, and it represents a true leadership act. Actually, even with colleagues we’ve known and appreciated for years, it may be surprising to find out, through a structured discussion process, sides of their thinking or experience that we’d never known. Community organizers view this kind of relationship building as essential to almost all their work. It establishes a basis of trust and understanding and enables
them to identify the common interests around which people can solve problems, bridge differences, and get work done.

Make It Work:
One-on-One Meetings

The one-on-one meeting or discussion is community organizers’ strategy of choice for opening up possibilities with people who don’t see eye to eye with us. Variations are also used by marketing firms to learn about people’s deep feelings and beliefs and with consulting groups to solve problems in businesses. As explained to us by one organizer, a one-to-one relational meeting is

an intentional, face to face, one to one meeting with another person to understand their interests, passions, and story, and to share your own—to explore trust with the other person and the possibility of a public relationship with them . . . so you can act together on issues of common concern. (handout by Nicholas Brunick, of Applegate and Thorne-Thomsen law firm)

What a one-on-one meeting is not:

- an opportunity to sell your ideas or to ask for help with a task or project
- an occasion for chitchat
- a search for someone who agrees with your point of view
- a search for friendship (Instead, it helps you build a public relationship, which is not the same as a private personal friendship.)

A one-on-one meeting provides an occasion to listen to and learn about another person’s stories, insights, memories, and visions, while valuing that person’s perspectives. It usually lasts just thirty to forty-five minutes and offers an opportunity to learn what makes that person tick, his priorities and self-interests, and how these came about. It’s an exchange. You discuss some of your own experiences and beliefs as well as asking about his, without worrying about being a little nosy.

How do you start a one-on-one session? If you find it too risky to start right off with someone you are having a conflict with, then practice first on a friend. Whomever you are meeting with, though, it’s a good idea first to clarify the
purpose of the discussion. If, in fact, differences have existed between the two of you, your partner may be anticipating some agenda or argument, which is not what this session should be about. So you can explain and reassure:

I know we’ve taken different points of view on some issues at our school. But I’d just like to know more about your background, so I can understand where you’re coming from. And I’d like for you to learn more about my work experiences, too. This way we can see what goals we have in common as well as why we differ about some matters. I’m not asking for any particular action. I just think we’ll be able to work together more easily if we know a little bit more about one another. This might seem a little unusual, but I read about it in a book on improving schools, and when I tried it with some teachers at my old school, it turned out to be pretty interesting.

Then, one good way to start is to say:

One thing I’d like to learn more about is how you came to teaching in the first place.

After your partner has told his story for a few minutes, go ahead and share your own. You may be surprised at the similarities or connections that turn up—or be interested in the contrasts—and it’s good to share your thoughts on these. You may well have a number of follow-up questions to ask as well. Another set of questions to pose is about the person’s professional values:

So what are some of the goals that are important to you in your work?

I wonder whether any particular experiences led you to these goals.

When math teacher Jill Knopic, at Al Raby High School for Community and Environment, tried a one-on-one meeting with Tom O’Brien from the history department, she realized how little she had known about him. While they weren’t actually adversaries, she’d wondered whether, as a Teach for America corps member, he was really committed to the profession or intending to leave after just a few years, as some TFA graduates do. This was especially important to her, since Al Raby faculty members are strongly committed to working together and making a difference in the community. Of course, she was happy to hear how much he did indeed care about this work. “I already had friends at Raby to turn to,” Jill said, “but if I didn’t, this would be a great way to help me make some connections.”

Naturally, we also need conversations that aren’t this structured. Seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher Janine Givens-Belsley engaged in
regular talks with her grade-level partner, whose style and philosophy differed considerably from hers. He favored heavier discipline but actually structured his classroom activities much more loosely. Janine, on the other hand, preferred a tight classroom organization, with every step of the work clearly spelled out. Unlike her partner, her discipline style was to keep the kids busy and deal quietly after class with anyone who acted out. This difference caused a number of incidents and increasing tension between the two teachers. Janine, however, sensed that he was an interesting individual beyond his teacher persona, so in numerous lunchtime conversations, she did a lot of listening and tried to identify values they shared. “I knew we weren’t going to agree on most things. He thought I was compulsive, but that was OK as long as he respected my needs. Sometimes his yelling, across the hall, disrupted my class. On several occasions he entered my classroom to round up the kids before I was finished with a lesson, and I had to draw a boundary on that. But give-and-take was important, so sometimes I’d let him take away my class time so he could give a test, even though I thought he really didn’t need it.” The two would never be best friends, but the frequent discussions led to compromises on both sides, defused tensions, and ended up creating mutual appreciation of each other’s differences.

When It Gets Tougher

Sometimes the lines of force between two teachers in a school are like the north poles on a couple of magnets, repelling each other implacably—or so it might seem. Perhaps the school is divided by factions. Maybe teaching philosophies differ sharply. Perhaps some action or crisis has exacerbated lurking divisions. Or there are differences in cultural background or individual styles. You might even face a daunting combination of all of the above. Is there anything you can do besides keep your head down and stay out of the fray? And why should you bother?

You may not be able to turn every relationship with other teachers into a mutual admiration club, but there are important reasons to try to lighten a conflict where you can—or at least help yourself and others understand it more empathically. First, it’s a drag on one’s spirits to work in a place with tensions roiling just below the surface. Not good for your health, actually. Second, as you try to build connections and clarify misunderstandings, you will learn new things about yourself and the others involved. And third, you’ll feel less helpless when you take actions that make your work life more sane. So finding strategies for resolving conflict contributes profoundly to your own and other
teachers’ power and community. As you move forward, it may help to remember the following pointers.

**Big meetings aren’t the place to deal with difficult topics.**

One insight we gained from hard experience: Don’t try to resolve a complex, emotionally charged difference in a big meeting unless it’s guided by a highly skilled outside facilitator experienced in dealing with conflicts. Without a carefully planned structure for the discussion, people may feel the need to defend themselves vociferously and take strong stands in front of their peers. It will be hard for participants to get their story out or to listen to others, with no simple process for acknowledging and addressing each one. Feelings easily get hurt, with no ready way to repair them. You’ll achieve more in small, quiet conversations where, even if strong emotions flame up, it will be easier to resolve them right away, or later if necessary.

**Learn how to keep discussions constructive.**

Even in private conversations, feelings can get bruised, people can feel attacked when sensitive issues are broached, or your colleague may doubt your motives. But at least in a smaller setting you can create openings to unravel the misunderstandings. Help for working through this can be found in the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, by Kerry Patterson and his colleagues (2002). Yes, this is a best seller, but it walks you in detail through typical heated conversations and identifies strategies that thoughtful people use to cool down and get focused on their common goals and problem solving. One technique the authors describe, for example, is to “step away” from the content—the accusations or defensive words being uttered—and, instead of answering them or defending yourself, try to identify a common purpose that you and the other person share. It’s not easy in the heat of the discussion, but worth learning to do!

**Find shared interests.**

We learned a lot from a friend who brought a depth of experience to teaching from his first career in the corporate world. As an African American male, he’s strongly committed to improving minority adolescent boys’ achievement, so he organized a program to address this crucial issue in his school. He knew,
however, that people hold differing beliefs about the best way to promote young minority men’s success. Not surprisingly, such differences cut across racial boundaries and can be held very passionately. In this case, some teachers asserted that the program would become a crutch and undermine, rather than strengthen, the students’ sense of personal efficacy.

Our friend—we’ll call him John—was convinced that the program would indeed help these students by building mutual responsibility and support among them. But how could he get through to the most influential of the naysayers, a teacher who had the ear of the administration? First, John said, he “studied” his colleague, gathering information from around the school about his interests and attitudes. Next, he asked this colleague for help. He had learned that the teacher had a great interest in gathering and analyzing data. So he explained that in order to help the young men, he, John, would need as much data on them as possible. His colleague agreed and a partnership flourished. Not only was this source of opposition diverted into a constructive partnership, but the program was stronger as a result.

Focus on kids’ learning.

Here’s how a group of four elementary teachers at a small school worked through a racially charged misunderstanding. To promote dual language learning, they had decided that the two Latina teachers would teach science in Spanish and social studies in English. All of the students, both those with English as a first language and those with Spanish, would spend an hour a day with the Latina teachers studying these two subjects. The Latina teachers would also take an additional twenty minutes to help the English speakers with Spanish and the Spanish-speaking kids with English. But the two Anglo teachers began to feel frustrated that all this didn’t leave enough time for the rest of the subjects. Their complaints were perceived as an attack on Spanish language teaching, and feelings were hurt.

After numerous attempts to clarify their concerns, the Anglo teachers realized that the real issue was time and kids’ needs, rather than any balance between the languages. Once everyone agreed that this was a legitimate concern, the team devised a new plan with longer but less frequent periods for science and social studies. The second language work was set aside when all agreed that it wasn’t proving effective. This solution wasn’t ideal, they knew, and the whole school would need to rethink scheduling the following year. But the compromise plan took the pressure off, and an understanding had been achieved.
A Word About Race

It is impossible to talk about teacher power and the importance of teacher community without acknowledging the role that race in America can play in a healthy or a dysfunctional school community. Racial issues are often avoided by teachers who prefer to deny their presence or who do not know how to talk about them. Meanwhile, divisions around race can cut in all directions, often adding an additional dimension to conflicts that might otherwise be minor, complicating personal differences, bringing out people’s insecurities, and making conflicts tougher to resolve. Even when racial issues sorely need to be addressed, sometimes principals, teachers, or other staff seek to gain control over or silence others instead of addressing the difficult underlying issues. Sometimes, racial concerns are reinforced when, for example, the teachers in a poor neighborhood watch a steady stream of new, underprepared white teachers arrive and then quit after a year or two, and, again, there can seem to be no way to deal with the issue. In many cases, conflicts divide blacks and whites or Latinos and African Americans; in other cases, conflicts arise within seemingly homogeneous ethnic groups, reflecting differences in social background or philosophy that are wider than some might realize.

We wish we knew all the answers to these questions, but we do believe the strategies presented in this book can help build connections between groups so they can begin to tackle the challenges and unpack the baggage of race. We know many teachers who initially saw race as an obstacle but found ways to overcome it, whether by working on relationships one-on-one or by strategically coping with specific conflicts. These teachers became more effective in their classrooms and helped build stronger multiracial communities at their schools, communities focused on students’ learning, with reduced weight from society’s racial baggage. In the process, they developed and made use of valuable leadership skills.

We have not found a single, neat formula for working out conflicts among school faculties, though a common theme appears to be the effort to find common ground and common purposes. Perhaps not everyone on the staff will become best friends. But these narratives help us understand how teachers who care about their professional community think and act more strategically to untangle conflicts and work constructively and respectfully with their colleagues.

In the Classroom

Building connections among various groups in the classroom and resolving conflicts depends not just on interventions in a crisis, but on the climate that you create from day one. One-on-one discussions between a teacher and
individual students offer a great opportunity for climate building with students at the start of the year, establishing your interest in each student and providing important information for your work with your kids that can be helpful in settling disruptions later on. If you use a writing workshop structure, you’ll be doing lots of these conferences about the kids’ work anyway. But it’s a good idea to focus a round at the start of the year on learning just who your students are, encouraging them to open up by sharing a few details from your own life. Two possible questions to get things started:

- Tell me about something you’re interested in that I might not guess.
- What’s one thing you felt good about in school last year?

Between students and teacher, the conferences will flow differently from the standard one-on-one interview. The student will be doing more of the talking, of course. Each conference might take just three to five minutes. But it’s still a good idea for you to draw connections between your own life and theirs, to let students know that your own experiences help you understand what they’re going through.

**Address conflict constructively.**

The traditional approach to settling conflicts between kids has been to assert authority: pull them apart, reprimand both, perhaps make a quick decision about who appears to have been the culprit, order one or both to apologize, and mete out some punishment. Often, however, this doesn’t really settle anything. Skillful teachers, in contrast, employ various structures for more meaningfully resolving conflicts, using the events as occasions for important teaching, and making the classroom a more cohesive community where learning can proceed efficiently. Peer mediation is one well-documented approach by which trained student teams guide kids in conflict to talk through and resolve problems themselves. Regular community meetings are another. The conflict circles and related strategies developed under the label *restorative justice* offer still more options. Another valuable approach is the Responsive Classroom program (www.responsiveclassroom.org), developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, which guides teachers to help a child involved in a disruption to really think through what took place and what a more constructive choice would look like. Kids role-play conflicts and alternative ways of responding to them. All of these approaches provide a safe, structured space in which students can work out conflicts more deeply, learn positive social
behaviors, and reach understandings that repair and strengthen the classroom community.

Steve has conducted peer mediation training for many teams of students and can testify that it’s a powerful learning experience and leadership training for the mediators as well as a great influence on school climate. Mediators must analyze their own language use to remain neutral and learn how to ask probing questions that bring out the details of the situation without assigning blame. These are higher-order thinking skills well worth taking the time to learn.

**WHAT PRINCIPALS CAN DO**

Principals we know find one-on-one interviews with teachers and students essential for building commitment to the school’s mission. They are crucial for learning the true concerns, passions, and talents of the faculty and kids, and for building the basis of trust that’s needed for settling conflicts constructively. Especially when new to a school and aiming to initiate new approaches, strong principals find one-on-ones exceedingly important. These conversations allow a new leader to learn what the real needs and attitudes are in a school. In a second round of individual meetings, the principal can introduce her thinking in response to what she has discovered, in a calm setting where she can explore what support or obstacles lie ahead. A series of studies by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory on strategies used by effective principals to promote change in their schools emphasizes that “principals of outstanding schools ‘listened well to parents, teachers and pupils’ . . . ‘developing one-to-one communication with teachers’” (Mendez-Morse 1992). Simply put, regular one-to-one talks are key to almost any change process in a school. Then when conflicts arise, the tools and strategies found in resources like *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson et al. 2002) will help the principal work on them in the same ways as we’ve described for teachers. And the principal will be modeling constructive problem solving as well.
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