



White paper

# The power of effective leadership in schools

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## **How important is leadership to the success of a school? Can a school leader make a significant difference in the performance of students?**

There are many influences on student success. Certainly factors outside of the school are important, but that's another challenge for another day. If we look inside the school environment at the influences having a positive impact on student success, effective teachers are at the top of the list.<sup>1</sup> Teachers and what they do in the classroom have a direct impact on student achievement. But the reality is good teaching doesn't just happen. Teachers and students interact in a school environment defined and created by school leadership. Research shows that, among school influences on student success, leadership is second only to teaching.<sup>1</sup> Effective school leaders contribute to learning indirectly, but in a significant way, by creating a school environment where students and teachers can flourish, and by influencing the many stakeholders who are a part of it.<sup>2</sup> All things considered, the quality of any organization's performance cannot exceed the quality of its leadership.<sup>3</sup>

In exploring the concept of school leadership effectiveness, it's important to consider both the personal and shared aspects of leadership within a school. As an individual, the "personal" leadership skill and practice of the principal is a key differentiator in driving student achievement gains and in retaining quality teachers. Consistent, proactive, and accessible school leadership has been identified as a critical engagement driver for teachers. The principal defines the vision for the school, sets the tone for inclusiveness, builds trusting relationships, and models resilience and adaptability.<sup>4,5</sup> In addition, the "shared" leadership that results from involvement of all stakeholders – principals, teachers, parents, school administrators, and others – is an even more important consideration. The principal creates the environment in which leadership becomes part of the organizational culture and a professional community is formed. Teachers then have the foundation to form relationships and work together to improve instructional practices that correlate to student achievement.<sup>6</sup> Because stakeholders and decision-making are distributed, the principal must develop and refine skills in collaboration, influence, and facilitation as well as focus on developing leadership in others. Principals are integral in the identification and advancement of "teacher leaders" as our schools move toward implementing this status of information leadership.

So, how exactly is leadership developed and sustained for those in school leadership roles? Those who appear to be naturally equipped for success are often referred to as "born leaders;" however, this assertion really is a myth. Leadership isn't an inherited trait but is learned and developed over time.<sup>7</sup> Leaders acquire skill and knowledge of how to be effective through both

formal and informal processes through their careers. Most school leaders come into their role well-prepared academically for the expectations of the position. Advanced degree programs are specifically designed for the aspiring principal. Most include a focus on leadership development as part of a comprehensive curriculum that also emphasizes instructional and administrative aspects of the job.<sup>8</sup> Though professional development continues throughout a principal's career, it's more often focused on the content of what they lead, in contrast to the process of how they lead. The limited opportunities for development of leadership skill and practice tend toward high-level presentations of effective leadership traits and concepts. Though insightful, this type of training rarely translates into a change in performance or improved effectiveness.

Given that leadership development is an evolving process, school leaders need ongoing opportunities to learn and grow as they work to fulfill their purpose in driving future success. This development needs to focus on both personal and shared leadership competencies that represent effectiveness in the school environment. School leaders need to know where to place their efforts – what will make them most effective and the highest impact.<sup>9</sup>

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Successful leaders leverage their awareness by aligning beliefs, adapting behaviors, and being accountable for results.

### Beliefs, behaviors, and results

Where do we start? Begin with a belief that “who you are is how you lead.” To be an effective leader, the first step is to know and understand yourself. Studies show self-awareness is a key factor in achieving high performance and success in a leadership role, it becomes even more critical as a leader progresses in his or her career journey.<sup>10,11</sup> Some even support that self-awareness is the most important capability for leaders to develop, outweighing technical and professional skills as drivers of success. The self-aware leader is equipped to build an environment of trust and fairness in which others can be productive and successful.

So, what do beliefs have to do with getting results? Shouldn't leaders use results data to make decisions? Of course, the answer is yes. But good leaders know to improve and sustain results, they have to also know which behaviors contribute to success – and which ones don't. As a school leader, do you know which instructional practices lead to student achievement? Can you identify those behaviors in others? Can you model them? What about your own behaviors – how self-aware are you? As leaders, we often respond with ingrained and reactive behaviors, without full awareness of the impact we have on others. We may fail to know which behaviors demonstrate our strengths and maximize our potential, and which ones represent derailers that limit our success.

But even leaders who are aware at some level are often at a loss for how to change the outcome. Great leaders understand the power of beliefs. Here's what we know: People act in a manner that's consistent with their beliefs. Beliefs are thoughts, emotions, values, motives, and preferences – all of those internal process that drive our actions. Some beliefs are personal, especially the longstanding ones about ourselves that we hold to be true. Beliefs are also shared, such as the organizational values and norms that provide the context for your school's culture. To change behavior, we first need to become aware of the beliefs that influence it. Awareness of our beliefs provides us with the key to changing our behaviors and positively impacting results, thereby maximizing our own potential as well as the success of others. This fundamental process – beliefs drive behaviors which create results – is represented in the Truist Leadership Model<sup>12</sup> It's the basis for conscious leadership achieved through:

- **Awareness of your beliefs and behaviors.** Knowing what you do – and its impact on others – is important. Knowing why you do it, and how to either change the belief or manage it, is the essential next step in doing something about it.
- **Action taken from a position of choice rather than routine patterns of reacting.** Having gained awareness, leaders have a choice to continue or change. Stepping out of the old pattern requires you to be focused and present, connecting actions to the accomplishment of your leadership purpose. This belief change process can create “cognitive dissonance,” occurring when an action is inconsistent with your belief about the action. We're motivated to resolve the dissonance, ideally creating a new strategy that achieves positive results. Leaders also support others in becoming conscious of their beliefs, then evaluating and adjusting beliefs and behaviors to ensure consistency.<sup>13,14</sup>

- **Accountability for the results of your decisions, behaviors, and displayed emotions.** Effective leaders establish their credibility by building trust – demonstrating integrity, judgment, competence, and vision. Not-so-good leaders are arrogant, manipulative, emotionally volatile, micromanaging, and well, you get the picture. Most people (leaders included) don't intend to be described in this way, right? We know it's not in our long-term interest to be emotionally volatile at work – or in most places for that matter! Yet for most people, there's often a gap between who they think they are and how others perceive them. Leaders who avoid accountability undermine trust, inevitably impacting their ability to build and maintain a high-functioning team – which is the definition of failed leaders.<sup>15</sup>
- **Alignment of leadership with the mission and purpose of your organization.** Leaders create and maintain an organization's culture – its vision, mission, and values. Through the process of communicating and reinforcing shared beliefs, leaders align actions with values, using them to create a common language and framework for prioritizing and decision-making.<sup>16</sup>
- **Adaptability to readily adjust your leadership strategy in order to achieve optimal outcomes.** Recent studies of managerial performance consistently identify not being able to learn from experience as a major factor, if not the major factor, in derailing careers. The conscious leader, through awareness of self, others, and the organization, learns what works and what doesn't, and demonstrates agility and effectiveness in adapting as needed.<sup>17</sup>

Equipped with increased self-awareness and an understanding of the Truist Leadership Model, school leaders can then begin to apply their skill to mastering the key leadership competencies of their roles, such as defining and communicating a shared mission and vision; making decisions and solving problems; building trust and engagement; collaborating with and influencing others; and guiding conflict resolution.<sup>2,18,19</sup>

Conscious leadership is acquired and practiced. It's not a one-time event, but a journey – one which begins with a learning experience that combines exploration of self-awareness through assessment and guided discovery activities, along with competency-focused content and application. The Truist Leadership Institute's *Mastering Leadership Dynamics™* for *Educational Leaders* program is that learning experience. It's leadership development focused on the leader – the one constant

that can make a difference, resulting in higher levels of trust and producing increased effectiveness of principals, their teachers and staff, and ultimately, their schools. The process requires dedication of time and energy, and a focused desire to change. The outcome – student achievement – is well worth the investment

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## Truist Leadership Institute

During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention, and improve the bottom line.