



Leadership Development

Anywhere, Anytime

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #49

December 4, 2020

The Collaborative Leader's Dilemma

Reading the recent emergency DOE order, listening to Mr. Forson speak at the Principals' Meeting yesterday, listening to the feedback from the breakout rooms and speaking to many of you recently, I was struck by a blog I read today from Interaction Associates (IA) that I wanted to share with all of you. The blog was written by Dr. Tom Rice, the previous CEO of IA. The focus of the blog was to address the difficulty of "balancing inclusiveness with decisiveness" in a collaborative work environment.

Collaboration is the foundation of the SJCS D; providing the opportunity for people to respond to surveys, work on task forces, provide public comment and share input on important topics are just a few methods used to gather information on critical decisions. At the building level you have your own processes and systems to gather information from key stakeholders prior to making decisions. We know, as Harry Truman once said, the buck stops with the person in charge. Decisions must be made so forward progress can be realized. So how does a leader balance inclusiveness with decisiveness?

Dr. Rice used Abraham Lincoln's early leadership decisions as the backdrop of the blog. "When Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861, the United States was being torn apart by divided loyalties." Seven states had passed resolutions to secede from the union, formed a new confederation and established a government with its own constitution and President. The country was in political chaos and social unrest; however, there was no pandemic. His own Republican Party was fractured. Conciliators wanted compromise to draw the confederacy back to the Union, and the hardliners wanted the 'traitors' punished. Lincoln needed to step in and make clear and decisive decisions, yet he wanted to gather information before he did so.

Lincoln did what many are not comfortable doing: he gathered a Cabinet which represented all of the opinions of the Party, many different than his own. The decision he made to choose men of various beliefs on his Cabinet is a leadership model that is both collaborative and decisive. He explained to the Cabinet that he valued their experience and opinions though the ultimate responsibility was his burden to bear. He gathered information from his Cabinet members before acting. His way of work included the following: Gather first-hand information and ask lots of question, find time and space for reflection, exhaust all possible alternatives prior to using 'decide and announce', anticipate and understand that resistance will occur, pay attention to the emotional needs of the stakeholders, maintain perspective, find ways to cope with pressure, maintain balance and replenish energy, be accessible, and keep your word.

Many decisions must be made in our district and schools prior to December 15, 2020. What processes will be used to gather information, ask questions, and review alternatives before decisions are made that will affect students, teachers, families, and the community? What course do you use as you tackle tough decisions? Why is it critical that the people in your school or department can depend on you to be consistent and seek their input? What are formal and informal structures you use to collaborate and solicit vital feedback?

Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *Team of Rivals*. September 2006.

Rice, Thomas J, Co-founder of the Interaction Institute for Social Change, Blog, December 2020.