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Lead is an Action Verb

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Lead is an Action Verb

This page is dedicated to creating a recipe file box of leader actions that will assist you in leading from your current position. Don't wait for someone or some event to be the catalyst for your leadership actions. Open the door and step across the threshold with positive, forward leadership of your staff and faculty.

Each week a new action recipe, provoking message from research, or leadership opportunity will be posted to sharpen your wit and wisdom and meld your actions into sustained leadership planning. We expect our faculty and staff to have complete lesson plans to lead classroom instruction, yet few leaders could produce their own written plans for leading their building, district or university/college department if they were pressed to do so.

The focus of the next few Leader Action Tips is Dialogue and Discussion.

The foundation of any successful leader is knowing the difference between Dialogue and Discussion and the ability to gauge when enough data-driven dialogue has transpired to move into discussion and decision-making. Leaders often express frustration with staff that leaves what seems to be a meaningful dialogue only to return to the classroom or office and continue to do business as usual. This is a "leadership" issue, not a "staff" issue. The leader did not facilitate enough dialogue to hear every voice in the room before moving to making a decision.

Dialogue vs. Discussion

Dialogue is an adaptive force when used within groups and organizations. The practice of dialogue develops self-organizing systems that clarify and maintain core identities. Given the nonlinear nature of systems and the forces around systems, planned actions and interactions are often difficult to predict with clarity and confidence. Dialogue helps us to find connection and meaning within the noise.

Skilled Discussion

Skilled discussion couples with skilled dialogue to support clarity of thought and commitment to action. For discussions to be productive, group members and groups need to be clear about the purpose of their interactions. While dialogue is about open exploration of ideas and perspectives, skilled discussion seeks focus and closure on a set of actions. This process, in turn, requires group members to balance advocacy for their ideas with equal energy inquiring into the ideas of others. Skilled discussion also depends upon healthy norms of critical thinking to allow groups to sort and analyze data, information and proposals. Last, skilled discussion is not possible without group

member clarity about the decision-making processes that will focus actions, and the implications and consequences of those decisions.

Data-driven dialogue and data-driven discussions have much in common. They each require the full attention of participants, careful listening, linguistic skills and the intention to separate data and facts from inference and opinions.

Defining Characteristics of Dialogue and discussion:

Dialogue	Discussion
Thinking holistically	Thinking analytically
Making connections	Making distinctions
Surfacing and inquiring into assumptions	Surfacing and inquiring into assumptions
Developing shared meaning	Developing agreement on action
Seeking understanding	Seeking decisions

Data-Driven Dialogue Versus Data-Based Decisions

Dialogue that leads to collaborative planning and problem solving is not the same as what is commonly presented as data-based decision making. Data-based decision making does not always assume collective processes. Leaders and specialists often analyze data sets and then attempt to explain what the numbers mean to others who must first own the problem before they can move towards solutions. In the worst cases, decisions about such things as curriculum, instruction, scheduling, and student groupings are imposed upon people who do not yet understand the underlying problems such innovations attempt to solve. In some settings, well intended processes short circuit when groups lack maps and tools for collaborative inquiry, problem-solving and planning.

In contrast, data-driven dialogue is a collective process designed to create shared understandings of issues and events using information from many different sources. Well-crafted dialogue honors the emotional as well as the rational components of problem-finding and problem-solving. The processes of data-driven dialogue both require and develop changes in the working culture of many groups and many organizations. It separates inquiry, analysis and problem finding from the rush to decide and the rush to act.

In too many schools we find groups lurching from problems to programs as they seek the comfort of action over the discomfort and the messiness of collaborative inquiry and investigation of root causes. Data-driven dialogue presses the pause button, inviting group members to reflect and inspect current results arising from current practices and beliefs about learning, teaching and engaging in common cause.

Excerpt from

Facilitating Data-Driven Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide to Collaborative Inquiry, 2004

Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton

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