Communication Issues in a Leadership Team in a School District

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Abstract
This study describes the communication practices of the Leadership Team (LT) in the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township (MSDDT), focusing on the members’ values and beliefs on communication within the team, communication deficiencies and communication channels and sources. The purpose of the study was to improve the guidance offered by the School System Transformation (SST) protocol to the MSDDT by prescribing preventive measures that could reduce communication deficiencies in their LT.

Introduction

Why systemic change is important
Over the 20th century, various school reform efforts were made to improve existing educational systems to better serve communities (Schlechty, 1990). However, experience has indicated that school reform as piecemeal change is not enough to improve the overall system, whether the system is a classroom, a school, schools within schools, or school districts (Reigeluth, 1999). A systemic change, which must include all aspects of the system, should be a true transformation. According to Reigeluth and Joseph (2001), a systemic change approach in K-12 settings could bring significant improvements to the educational experience of students and their families, school employees and the entire community.

Jenlink et al (1998) define systemic change as an approach that recognizes the “interrelationships and interdependencies among the parts of the educational system, with the consequence that desired changes in one part the system must be accompanied by changes in other parts that are necessary to support those desired changes” (p. 219). It also recognizes the “interrelationships and interdependencies between the educational system and its community, including parents, employers, social service agencies and much more, with the consequences that all those stakeholders are given active ownership over the change effort” (p. 219).

Guidance for the systemic change process
In today’s US, a few school- and district-wide systemic change efforts have been implemented. Several design theories were developed to guide change efforts. One big category of these design theories is guidance primarily about what the school should be like, not the systemic change process. These included two nationally recognized educational change methods, the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) and Success for All–Roots & Wings (SFA). CES (Sizer, 1984; 2002) is a system that promotes ten common and eight organizational principles as the foundation of their philosophy of schooling to restructure secondary schools. SFA (Slavin & Madden, 2001; Stringfield, Ross & Smith, 1996) is a school-wide change model with an underlying principle that promises “every child” will be successful in learning to read through their curriculum. Other design theories about the change products are the School Development Program (SDP), and Knowledge Work Supervision® (KWS). SDP (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996) is a model that advocates on behalf of parents and families to have a central role in the change process for the education of their children. KWS (Duffy, Rogerson, & Blick, 2000) is a methodology that assists the redesign of an entire school district from an innovative point of view by recognizing three fundamental principles: a. understanding how systems change, b. working with individuals as well as with groups, and c. developing necessary attitudes and skills of those facilitating the change.
On the other hand, theories guiding school change process include GSTE and SUTE. The GSTE (Jenlink, Reigeluth, Carr, & Nelson, 1996; 1998) is a guidance model to facilitate systemic change in K-12 school districts. Duffy also developed a framework to guide transformational change in school districts, which is called Step-Up-To-Excellence (SUTE). GSTE and SUTE were blended into a new hybrid methodology, which is called the School System Transformation (SST) Protocol (Reigeluth, C. & Duffy, F, 2008). It has some sequential elements and some elements that need to be addressed continuously throughout the transformation process. The elements fall into five phases: prepare, envision, transform, sustain and evaluate. Each step in the protocol is not in a lock-step sequence and should be perceived as a set of flowing activities that converge, diverge and backflow from time to time. Each phase has several steps, and each step has multiple tasks and activities. The SST Protocol has been applied as guidance for the change effort in the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township (MSDDT) in Indianapolis. One of the phases in the SST Protocol addresses the process of forming and participating in a Leadership Team (LT), which could either promote the success or ensure the failure of a district-wide change effort, and thus is the focus of this study. The performance, contribution and impact of a LT in a system could be strongly influenced by the efficiency of communication among team members.

**Communication theories related to systemic change**

The traditional definition of communication is the exchange of information, ideas and feelings in order to get a message across (Mclntire., & Fessenden, 1994). There are various types of communication: intrapersonal, interpersonal, public, mediated, organizational, intercultural and mass (Fiordo, 1990). Intrapersonal communication takes place within each of us as we talk to ourselves; interpersonal communication describes communication between participants who are dependent upon one another and have a shared history; public communication refers to the sending of messages to an audience; mediated communication pertains to the use of various technologies to mediate the sending and receiving of meaning and messages; organizational communication refers to messages transacted within, from and to an organization; intercultural communication applies to sending and receiving messages between organizations and individuals from different cultures and societies; mass communication is about how individuals and entities relay information through mass media to large segments of the population at the same time.

Considering the above categorization of communication, given the purpose of this study, in this phase of the SST, attention will only be given to interpersonal, public, mediated and intercultural communications because they are directly related to communication skills the team members are expected to acquire, communication channels and sources desired by the team and how to improve communication deficiencies among different stakeholder groups. In the later phases of the research, organizational communication will be touched upon since the findings from the analysis of the current data collected strongly suggest a close relationship between the internal LT communication and the LT’s communication with other stakeholder groups outside the team. Intrapersonal, intercultural and mass communication will be skipped in this study because it specifically focuses on communication within the leadership team under analysis.

Although issues related to leadership communication have been well researched in both school and corporate settings, researchers usually tend to focus on communication strategies or skills leaders or executives are supposed to have in order to guide, direct, motivate and inspire people through effective communication. For example, Deborah Barrett summarized and proposed several leadership communication frameworks, arguing that leadership communication consists of layered, expanding skills from core strategy development and effective writing and speaking to the use of these skills in more complex situations (Barrett, 2008). However,
some of the frameworks and skills might not apply to the LT of MSDDT, because the team consists of different stakeholders in the school district, including administrators, teachers, parents, community members, support staff, school board and ministerial staff.

The composition of the team reflects the application of the stakeholder participation concept. Stakeholder participation has been defined as “a process whereby stakeholders – those with rights (and therefore responsibilities) and/or interests – play an active role in decision-making and in the consequent activities which affect them” (SDD, 1995, p. 5). Stakeholder participation in the decision-making of educational systems can potentially improve their design and implementation by improving ownership, building consensus, helping to reach disadvantaged groups, mobilizing additional resources, and building institutional capacity (Colletta & Perkins, 2007).

Research questions

The LT in MSDDT was formed under the guidance of the SST protocol to fulfill the mission of guiding the change process in the township. This kind of LT is significant in today’s educational setting. An industrial-age mindset of decision-making has prescribed change in education for many years through a top-down decision-making structure that functions with little input from its stakeholders. The introduction of decision making teams (comprised of diverse stakeholders in the organization) into the leadership of organizations has revolutionized the way these organizations function and produce (Reigeluth & Duffy, 2008).

Senge (1990) argues that a learning team within an organization has the capacity to think together and dialogue with the purpose of learning together. He states that team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. Duffy and colleagues (2000) proposed a systemic change process to transform school systems into high-performing organizations of learners through team-based design work. Some advantages of using teams in systemic change efforts include: a) teams increase participation and collaboration, which could increase motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment, b) teams dissolve hierarchies within institutions, creating opportunities for communication and collaboration, c) teams promote conditions for creation and diffusion of knowledge, and d) those who are closest to the work understand best how to improve it (Duffy et al., 2000). It can be observed that communication permeates in all these factors in order for them to be successfully achieved. In addition to communication skills each member is required to possess, this study seeks to investigate whether the team culture and climate are conducive to communication and whether communication channels and sources are supportive of team communication. These issues were developed into research questions to examine the current status of internal communication within the LT of MSDDT.

The research questions are:

1. What are the implied communication patterns of the LT (who do members share ideas with and how often)? What characteristics of communication exist within the team?
2. What are team members’ values, beliefs and perceptions about their team communication?
3. What are the means and sources of communication within the team?
4. What are the communication deficiencies and how they can be improved?

Methods

This research study employed a formative research methodology, which follows a case study methodological approach in qualitative research (Reigeluth & Frick, 1999, p. 637). According to Reigeluth and Frick, formative research asks three basic questions: 1) What is working? 2) What needs to be improved? And 3) how can it be improved? Formative research is a kind of developmental research or action research that is intended to improve design theory for designing instructional practices or processes (Reigeluth & Frick, 1999).
This methodology is useful in identifying what worked for communication at Leadership Team (LT) meetings in MSDDT and how communication could have been improved, indicating possible additions to the SST Protocol to improve communication at LT meetings.

Formative research classifies case studies as either designed or naturalistic cases. According to Reigeluth and Frick (1999), formative research is a designed case when a theory/model is instantiated and then formatively evaluated. In contrast, formative research is a naturalistic case when the case selected was not specifically designed according to the theory but serves the same goals and contexts (Pascoe, 2008). According to Reigeluth and Frick (1999), in naturalistic cases the formative evaluation of the instantiation is done during its application. Therefore, this research study was a naturalistic case, primarily because the theory did not offer guidelines to enhance communication at LT meetings, and it was studied post facto, whereby formative evaluation occurred after the case had already taken place. A naturalistic study is usually conducted based on the following procedure: 1. Select an existing theory; 2. Select a case; 3. Collect and analyze formative data on the case; 4. Offer tentative revisions for the theory (Reigeluth & Frick, 1999). With this procedure serving as the basic framework of the current study, the researcher aims at revising the current SST theory relevant to the communication of the LT.

School district

The school district selected for this study was the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township (MSDDT) in the State of Indiana, US, with an approximate population of 24,000. It was one of eleven public school corporations in Indianapolis Marion County, and at the time of the study served approximately 5,500 students. MSDDT offered one centralized early childhood program, four elementary schools (grades 1-4), two intermediate schools (5-6), one middle school (7-8), and one central high school having five academies (9-12). At the time, students were served by almost 260 full-time teachers and more than 280 professional staff members. Approximately 90 percent of MSDDT students were considered white, and some 40 percent of the student population received free or reduced lunches and textbooks (Pascoe, 2008). In 2001, MSDDT and Indiana University established a partnership to enhance the educational opportunities offered to students, their families, and the community-at-large through a district-wide systemic change process using the SST.

Leadership Team

In the spring of 2001, a predecessor of the Leadership Team, named the Core Team, was formed. They met as a team to identify core values and ideas that could guide the MSDDT to improve its educational process and include all stakeholders in reaching consensus on the changes that could most benefit their students. This Core Team met almost every week until the end of the fall of 2002, at which point they expanded into the LT, though they continued to meet as a Facilitation Team for planning the LT meetings. In February 2003 the newly formed LT had a broad representation of MSDDT stakeholder leaders, including community members, to work together to design better learning experiences for students in this school district.

From mid-November 2003 through April 2004 a second phase of the LT took place. The LT was reconstituted and expanded, and devoted time to reviewing data gathered from stakeholders in the school system about the need for systemic change in their school district. Next, the LT developed a Framework of mission, vision, and ideal beliefs about education, developed in collaboration with the community, which became prominent throughout the MSDDT. The current LT has forty members, including eleven administrators, eleven teachers, seven parents, four community members, two support staff, one school board member, one ministerial member and three facilitators.
Data Collection and Analysis

In the study, observation, survey, focus group and individual interviews, and documents were used as main techniques for data collection. Hand analysis was used as the analysis approach and findings were validated through triangulation and member checking.

Observation

Assuming a role of nonparticipant observer, the researcher observed LT meetings, which were held once a month. The researcher attended meetings and observed discussions to further inform the development of the protocol. Field notes were produced during three observation sessions in November and December of 2008, with each lasting 2 hours, about communication and types of information considered and used. The field notes were used for identifying themes related to communication in the LT and for informing the survey questions and interview protocols later developed.

Survey

A short survey questionnaire with three questions was sent out to the entire LT to capture the characteristics of the team’s communication and the members’ perspectives on good communication and leadership skills. In order to get the most responses from the team members, the survey was made as short as possible. It was sent out via email together with a participant information sheet, and participants were reminded to reply only to the researcher to protect their confidentiality. The survey was sent out multiple times, and twelve out of thirty seven members (excluding the facilitators) filled out the survey. The twelve respondents include five administrators, four teachers and three community members. The sample has limited representativeness of the whole LT, but the majority stakeholders of the LT were included in the sample. The information about which stakeholder group each person was in is known. The three questions asked were:
1. Within the LT, name the people with whom you are most likely to share new ideas. What is the frequency you communicate with each other related to the LT issues? (the number of times per day or per week or per month)
2. Within the LT, what people would you be most likely to choose as the team leader if you were to work on a team project? And why?
3. If you were going on a vacation, name the members on the Leadership Team you would like to go with. Why them?

Interviews

Eight members of the team were interviewed. Three of them were teachers, three of them were community members, one person was on the school board and one was a school principal. It is noticeable that this sample is not sufficiently representative of the whole leadership team. The generalizability of the study results is thus reduced. The years they had been on the team ranged from one to seven years. The community members included parents, retired teachers and people who were from a university located in the same city as the township. All of them had been living in the township for more than fifteen years. Two focus groups were conducted with three teachers and two community members based on a semi-structured interview protocol. Each focus group lasted about 30 minutes.

Three one-on-one interviews were conducted with a principal, a community member and a member from the school board, with each lasting about 40 minutes. Semi-structured interview protocols were used, and open-ended questions were asked to allow maximal flexibility for participants’ responses. The researcher took brief notes during the interviews, and all the interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Documents

Public documents, such as minutes from LT meetings, official memos, newsletters, notes, records, and physical and on-line archival materials were collected as sources to make sense of communication channels and
patterns in the group. Notes were taken about the documents to record information from them. The documents were used to gain a sense of the context and language used and to trace the linkages of discourse related to key themes.

Data analysis
All the notes and materials obtained were organized by type, participant, site and combinations of these categories. Duplicate copies of all forms of data were kept. All the interviews and observational notes were transcribed. The data analysis was conducted following data analysis activities of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data reduction is “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the ‘raw’ data...” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 21). Summary information could be placed in a series of matrices which specify relevant situational characteristics and array categories of data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Guided by this process, the researcher read the data, marked them by hand, divided them into parts and created a database. To narrow the text data into a few themes, the coding process followed was to make sense of the whole data, divide them into text, label the segments with codes, examine codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes. The researcher scanned theory and methods literature for ideas that would help make sense of emerging themes and concepts. Analytic memos and theoretical notes with commentary about emerging themes, anomalies of inconsistencies and relationships were created. Portrayals of each theme were written, and tables and charts were produced to represent the findings.

Validating findings
The findings were validated through the strategies of triangulation and member checking. As stated in the data collection section, the researcher triangulated among different data sources to enhance the accuracy of the study. With different types of data (observational field notes, interviews, notes on documents), and different methods of data collection (observation, interview, document analysis), the information was drawn from multiple sources, which enhanced the accuracy and credibility of the findings. The researcher also checked notes and transcriptions with participants in the study to determine and enhance credibility.

The findings will be checked back to participants, and they will be asked via email about the accuracy of the report, whether the description is complete and realistic, and if the interpretations are fair and representative. The report will be sent to them when the study is finished.

Findings
The findings are organized in relation to the research questions. They start with the characteristics of the team’s communication, communication skills admired by the team members, followed by the team members’ values, beliefs and perceptions about their team communication, the means and sources of communication within the team and the communication deficiencies detected by the members.

Team communication characteristics
The researcher intended to capture the characteristics of the team’s communication by asking questions examining who the members were that most team members would like to share ideas with. After analyzing the answers given by twelve members, five people from the administrator group and three teachers from the teacher group were most frequently chosen as people to share ideas with. It also implies that people intended to choose people from the same stakeholder groups as themselves. Although the result was not based on the responses from all the team members, it appears that communication based on hierarchical ranks still plays a role in the team. However, another explanation is that since the LT only met monthly, the administrators were the team members who met most often, or administrators were in charge of the meeting planning and management, including member recruiting, therefore they were more familiar with most of the members. It needs to be noted that none of the community members, parents, support staff or school board members were chosen, which means there must have been some communication breakdowns between teacher and administrator groups and
the members outside the school. Another explanation to this phenomenon could be that a group of the most influential people has emerged in the team. These discoveries shed light on developing the interview protocol at the later stage of the study and the reasons underneath were explained in the later section.

For all the respondents who did reply that there were certain people with whom they would like to talk about LT issues, most of them only met each other once or twice a month, with only a few exceptions for some teachers, but most teachers were in different schools, so they could not see each other very often. It appeared that, except for the monthly LT meetings, there was not enough face-to-face communication for team members, even with the ones with whom they would most like to share ideas.

According to the answers respondents gave to the survey, it was found that, other than formal relationships developed based on working relations between the team members, informal relationships did emerge within the group. Nine out of twelve respondents chose some team members as their vacation partners. However, 3 of them refused to choose anyone as a vacation partner because they didn’t know anyone well enough. The reasons people chose others as vacation partners included: same hobbies and interests, sense of humor, same age, fascinating personalities, know them longest. Furthermore, the partners chosen were always within their own stakeholder groups, which means teachers tended to choose teachers and administrators tended to choose administrators, and people working in school never choose community members.

**Leadership and communication skills admired**

According to the answers to the survey, four people from the administration group and two from the teacher group were chosen as team leaders, for they possessed certain leadership and communication skills desired by other members. These skills are summarized below: stays on top of the issues; would do their share and designate out some responsibilities; work in a professional and respectful manner; will not sugar coat information; accept the ideas of others; understand my job; thorough; efficient; creative; hard working; high work ethic; have access to many resources; passion for students and learning; make a person feel needed and appreciated; organization skills; knowledge of district; not afraid to do work themselves; out of the box thinking; keep the team focused; not hesitant to speak; not beat around the bush.

**Team members’ values, beliefs and perceptions on team communication**

Interviewees were asked about the leadership role and the team vision, mission and products to examine if this information had been effectively communicated to the members. Most of the interviewees agreed that the LT provided them with a framework and a bigger picture of where the township needed to go. It helped them look at a more global picture of all the stakeholders involved in the reinvention process and come to know different perspectives from stakeholders. Although not every member was clear about the vision, mission and products of the LT, the members who provided answers agreed that the mission of the LT was to assist the rest of the school system with guidelines to improve schools. In addition, they were also aware that the mission of the LT might change over time.

Compared with the vision and mission of the LT, the members’ opinions on its products varied from person to person. The vision and mission statement was considered a major product of the team. Some considered that the major product was sharing ideas and getting feedback from different stakeholders, and some believed the products of the leadership team were the tools or guidelines that support the schools to form their teams and drive their reinvention processes. The inability to state the vision and mission of the LT and the mixed understanding of its products reflects that these concepts were not effectively communicated to the members, which was again confirmed by the answers given by some interviewees. Two members emphasized that the vision and mission of the LT was really cloudy at one point.

However, both of them also pointed out that the goal of the team had been defined in recent months and the team had been back on the right track. That largely was due to stronger leadership from the central office, which
worked hard to reenergize, refocus and redirect the team. Other members expressed the opinion that the LT had had thorough conversations and follow-up concerning its vision, mission and products. The seeming ineffectiveness might have been caused by some individuals not taking an active role or by gaps due to absences from the meetings.

In order to examine if the team had effectively communicated among its members about their particular roles in the team, participants were asked about this. Almost every member interviewed was clear about their particular role in the team, at least conceptually, since some community members were not very positive as to whether they had met the requirements of their roles. Generally speaking, the participants thought that they were expected to actively participate in the meetings, bring in their ideas and thoughts and share their point of view with each other. They were specifically clear about their bridging role to communicate between the LT and their own stakeholder group, although this clarification was reinforced only six months earlier, which is consistent with the time talking points were sent out through email to each member. This demonstrates that the team had been making efforts to emphasize the importance of communicating with all stakeholder groups.

It is worth noting that the teachers interviewed universally considered themselves as an integral part of the reinvention process and had high demands on themselves in terms of changing mental models, communicating within the team, learning related knowledge, and being supportive in their own buildings to move the reinvention process forward. Some mentioned that they attended administration courses or went to retreats. By comparison, although community members were clear that each was expected to bring an outsider perspective, they stated their concerns that sometimes they felt lost and didn’t really know whether they were making contributions to the team. The researcher further explored this issue and examined the reasons by asking questions related to these communication deficiencies.

**Sources and means of communication**

For the sources and channels of communication within the leadership team, all the members interviewed shared the opinion that key people on the team, especially those on the Worker Bee team, served as communication sources. In addition, a new communication strategy, which had only been adopted six months earlier, had proved very effective. That is the central office staff summarized the “talking points” from each meeting and sent them to all members via email. According to them, the talking points had been useful because they served as a good reminder of what they did in each meeting and provided a good way for them to share what they had done in the LT with their stakeholder groups. And to a large extent, those talking points were produced particularly for the members to take back to their own stakeholder group members.

It needs to be noted that, although every participant was notified before the interview that the study was to examine the internal communication within the LT, almost every participant touched on the issues of communication between the team and other stakeholder groups and provided suggestions. That feedback, although not the initial focus of the study, was good to have in that the issue of communication with other stakeholder groups was consistent with the participants’ understanding of the LT role and the composition of the team itself.

**Communication deficiencies**

The lack of informal communication was mentioned by every member interviewed as one of the communication deficiencies on the team. It is consistent with the survey results presented above. As introduced by the members above, the LT meeting itself served as the primary source of communication. However, the meeting was only held once a month, therefore most members interviewed felt there was a lack of understanding of people on a personal basis. Some of them didn’t even know who the team members were and what they did. This issue is more obvious with community members, because most of them are not directly involved in school and have fewer opportunities to meet with other community members.
The members felt that there had been too many mental activities and idea exchanging taking place, which had been effective to learn knowledge but ineffective to get to know the members’ needs. Though members were divided into small groups to work on certain activities almost every meeting, they didn’t get the opportunity to work with every member and get to know them. The lack of informal communication and less understanding of other team members contributed to a team culture that is more alien and intimidating for community members to the extent that several of them started to question their function and contribution to the team.

It has to be highlighted that all the community members interviewed felt uncomfortable offering their ideas and questioned their own value on the team, and they also analyzed various reasons behind that. In addition to the lack of informal interaction among team members and individuals’ personality traits, they deemed the structure of the team (25 educators and four or five outsiders) and the jargon used by the team were primary impediments to communication between members of the LT. They thought the setting of mostly educators in the group not only was intimidating for people who were not so used to talking in front of big groups, but also got them stuck in a mode that they were just sitting there as advisory members watching internal people really doing the work.

**Management of LT meetings**

All the participants provided positive feedback about the management of the LT meetings. The time of the meetings worked for everybody’s schedule. Though the meetings were held monthly, most interviewees thought this frequency was enough because they understood that things needed time to develop. They also praised the organization of the meetings and activities. However, people also acknowledged that, since too many things were going on in each meeting, quite often they felt like they didn’t quite understand the goals of each meeting and got nowhere in some of those meetings. One common opinion was that the agenda of each meeting was too packed.

The participants acknowledged the importance of the activities designed by the Worker Bee team for each meeting, and some of them were deemed very effective. For instance, several of the interviewees mentioned the activity in which they shared the middle school redesign process. However, there were complaints that sometimes it seemed they were doing an activity that was well planned by the Worker Bees but was not very relevant to the real world or its purpose was not so clear, and they did not feel they could play an active role in it.

The participants also expressed mixed opinions on the leadership of the LT. On the one hand, some had seen the meetings as teacher-directed because the teachers usually facilitated and directed the activities. On the other hand, some stated the concern that they felt more like followers than leaders in the group because often the Worker Bee group planned all the activities. This indicates that the LT has not encouraged the members to have input in planning the meetings or activities. Though time might be an issue with most of the members, being provided with some degree of decision making in the activities they will do in the meeting was not considered a bad thing.

**Discussion**

The descriptions from the interviewees reflect communication issues existing both within the team and between the team and other stakeholder groups. One the whole, the suggestions provided are helpful to address several of the eighteen continuous processes in the SST Protocol, namely sustain motivation, develop and sustain appropriate leadership, develop group-process and team-building skills, build team spirit, engage in reflection, communicate with stakeholders, and foster organizational learning. These suggestions will be discussed in relation to the research questions explored in the study and the implications for the SST Protocol.
**Improve communication deficiencies & communicate with stakeholders**

One member suggested that assigning stakeholder jobs in the team might be a solution to bring in more parents or community members, which is also a good way to increase opportunities for meeting other members more informally. Another member suggested that, in order for people to have a better idea of how each member is communicating back to their stakeholder group, the LT should allocate special time for discussing this issue and make it transparent rather than continuing to keep it secretive. To help people know each other much better, they expressed a strong hope to allocate special time to dealing with members’ questions and feedback, providing clarification if it’s needed. A list with updated member information was highly welcomed. Moreover, the members expressed their willingness to see more mixed or shifted groups so that they would have the chance to meet and work with more members on the team. This is consistent with communicating with stakeholders, which is specified in the SST Protocol. More representatives of stakeholder groups in the team will bring more perspectives into team discussion and activities and facilitate the communication between the school and community. Since community participation is so important in the whole change process, it is suggested that stakeholder participation should be emphasized in each phase of the five phases specified in the SST Protocol.

**Improve communication deficiency & sustain motivation of community members**

Sustaining motivation is an important process out of the 18 processes listed in the SST Protocol. To encourage community members to contribute to the team, the following solutions were suggested:

1. Be provided with a clearer understanding of the function of community members on the team and historically what contribution community members made to the team.
2. Visit schools and classrooms in order to have a better idea about what is going on in the school.
3. Recruit student members on the LT to provide more concrete information to the community members.
4. Rather than sitting in a large group meeting, one-on-one or two-on-one meetings in informal surroundings (such as a coffee shop) might be more comfortable for most parents and community members.
5. The mentality needs to be changed from expecting people to come to school to going out and talking to families.

**Improve communication channels and sources & develop group-process**

The participants identified various communication channels and sources that they thought might help address communication deficiencies within the team. These suggestions are thought to improve group-process developing in the leadership team with better record of group activities. For the problem of not remembering team members’ names, one member suggested that the team keep a case of people’s name tags so that each one can put it on during the meeting and return it afterwards. Another suggestion was to give each member a binder or a notebook and provide updated information about group members. Through the interviews, the researcher learned that there had been a binder for each member several years ago to keep related readings and information sheets. However, the binder got too heavy, and people just ceased bringing them to the meetings. An effective solution might be keeping the binder with limited pages, but no matter how the information would be stored; the members need to receive updated information on each member.

To facilitate communication both within the LT and with the outside stakeholder groups, it is suggested that a website could be built holding podcasting and vodcasting of each LT meeting so that not only the team members, but everyone in the township could be able to know what is going on in those meetings. This would be a good way to spread the vision of the LT, keeping the teachers and community informed and would even act as a good way to introduce team members.

**LT meeting management & foster team learning**

Team learning within the LT has tremendous significance for the whole district, given the steering role it assumes. Several suggestions were made on the management of the meetings in order to foster team learning
and for all the members to be clear about not only what they had done and what they needed to do in each
meeting, but more importantly, what they had gained from what they had done and what they still felt fuzzy
about and needed more clarification on.

1. Use dinner time to have dinner conversation, reviewing what they did last time and the agenda of the
meeting on that day.
2. Pair the members with different people each time during dinner time.
3. Allocate reflection time every meeting to give anyone who didn’t speak the chance to speak up.
4. Assign one person in charge of the meeting each month. Let the members know who the go-to person will
be if they have problems or questions. More consistency would be added to the meetings in this way.
5. It may take more than a meeting every month to make community members feel involved in the team.
   Therefore, aside from the LT meetings, three or four key members of the LT should go out to meet with
   community members and build stronger relationship with them.
6. If the LT decides the meeting frequency is not enough for the team, it is suggested to make each meeting
   longer rather than having another one each month.
   To give the participants a clearer sense of those meeting activities, one implication the researcher got from
   the interviewees is that after each activity, the team should get members’ feedback or at least provide them with
   an evaluation form and then decide whether to keep the activity or not. A successful activity would be the one
   that is relevant to educational issues, such as having discussions about how the high school work has informed
   the middle school work.

One of the implications for team member recruiting is that the potential member should be someone who is
proactive, aware of their role and driven to assume it, comfortable with large group discussion and willing to be
integrated into the bigger group, and motivated to learn about different fields of knowledge. It’s better if they
have kids or someone who is involved in the school system.

Conclusion
Communication is one of the most important factors that determine participants’ contribution in any team
effort, particularly an effort as complex as a district-wide systemic change process. The communication
breakdowns that LT members experience could potentially deny the success of the effort. This research study
addressed what those communication deficiencies are and how to improve them. When members of a LT are not
effectively communicating, opportunities to contribute, grow as a group, and continue the progress that this
particular team is providing to the system-wide change are put at risk. Hence, studying and improving the
communication of LT members is important to the successful implementation of a change effort in a school
district.

For the eight participants who did accept the interview, four of them were community members, whose
perspectives on the communication problems in the LT are definitely different from members of other
stakeholder groups. Therefore, more information needs to be collected from other stakeholder groups to verify
the interpretation the researcher has so far.

The study also discovered some related research topics, such as how communication affects team members’
performance, how the LT should improve its management for better communication to take place, and who
should assume the leadership role within the LT. Therefore, this study should be considered as a stepping stone
in a long series of research studies to inform LTs and school districts about team membership interactions and
communication. More research is needed.

Limitations of the study
The limited number of respondents to the survey and limited number of members who accepted being
interviewed greatly impact the credibility of the study results. Unwillingness to participate in the study was
partly due to bad timing (the survey and interview were arranged between late November and early December, when most of the administrators and teachers were especially busy with their school work) and perhaps partly due to team members being reluctant to talk about or even to address communication issues they were having. Another possible reason is that they were just not interested in the research study itself. To make the study complete and more valid, the researcher planned a second phase of data collection, and tried to arrange more interviews with the teachers and administrators, in order to depict a more thorough picture of communication within the Leadership Team. However, the second phase of interview did not materialize due to the LT members’ reluctance to accept interviews. A legitimate explanation for this could be that the LT members were too busy with their current professional roles to consider volunteering. Another explanation could be that the other LT members were not so aware of communication issues. It could be further explained that other team members, different than some community members and some teachers who accepted most interviews of the study, did not consider communication was a big issue for the team. Hopefully more data could be gathered in the future to enrich the findings from the current study.

References


