



# Developing Team Leadership

**Eric Shaw**

Eric Shaw, principal of Highlands Intermediate School in New Plymouth, says that one of the most important and enjoyable roles he has as a principal is developing leadership within the school. He believes that team leaders at all levels have a critical role to play in working with classroom teachers for learning and teaching to be effective. Team leaders are responsible for ensuring teachers are provided with direction for the next steps in their professional learning. In his project report Eric describes the development process he uses with team leaders and senior leaders at the school.

We know that the quality of teaching practice and outcomes for students can vary greatly between teachers, classrooms, within teams and consequently across the school. So it is important not to assume that sound learning and teaching is taking place, even though everyone wants to be the best teacher they can be! A key role of our assistant and deputy principal is to ensure that we are working towards consistency and continuity within teaching teams and across the school.

We have six teaching teams at Highlands Intermediate, with the deputy principal responsible overall for the three Year 8 teams and the assistant principal the three Year 7 teams. Each team has a team leader who receives guidance and support from the deputy and assistant principals to work professionally with the teachers in their teams.

## Team leaders make the difference

The leadership skills of the six team leaders are the key to making a difference in our school. They have a significant hands-on connection with students and staff in their team at the cutting edge of where it all happens. Professional development through staff meetings only aids teaching skills to a point. It is what the team leader brings to the team that is critical to teacher development

and student progress. My dilemma as principal was (and is) how to develop an individual team leader's accountability in realising how important their role is to both student progress and teacher development in their team.

The team leader also has the added responsibility of facilitating and planning the development of the individual teacher's goals set from appraisals the previous year. The team leader's role is complex, because they also have a class to teach. While they have release time to work with others, this also means time away from their own classes.

To develop continuity, school meetings are carefully structured, with each serving a specific purpose. One week there is a staff meeting, the next week a team leaders' meeting, and the following week the Year 7 and 8 year group meetings facilitated by the deputy and assistant principals as year group leaders. Individual teams meet each week during their specialist class release time. A key factor here is that we have a link between the four meetings so that areas of focus are consistently highlighted and acted upon.

## Senior leaders take the lead

The assistant principal, deputy principal and principal meet to set areas of focus for our year groups. These are based on school expectations, observations made in classrooms, or as a follow-up to a specific whole school focus like the teaching of reading. The first focus every term is on initial planning, classroom organisation and class culture. Class culture is central in a school like an intermediate because student connection is so critical to any progress. The next focus areas are the foundation skills of reading, writing and mathematics.

Following their observations the assistant and deputy principals give feedback to the team leader on the overall team position and individual teachers. The team leader's role is then to plan, implement and develop any areas for improvement with the team or individual teacher. Important to this is commitment and understanding of what is trying to be achieved by all involved. For the team leader this may mean part of their own release time is used to make further



observations or to demonstrate a particular skill to develop teacher skill or understanding. The key though is the programme in action and what is happening for the students.

Each team focuses on what is happening for the students. This establishes a clear link between teaching practices and the quality of class programmes. One of our school beliefs is that teachers are also on a learning curve. We are quite happy if teachers lack particular knowledge and skills, provided they are willing to learn. Our job is to take them from point A to point B, regardless of where they are on the knowledge and skills continuum. This is not about being an expert, but rather knowing how to utilise the various existing skills of staff to develop any skill requirement.

## Planning meetings

The agenda for the whole staff meeting always has a specific focus around an agreed curriculum, teaching skill, or school culture need.

The agenda for the team leader meetings is focused on their professional needs as leaders. I facilitate these meetings which centre around leadership and involve feedback, readings and discussion about aspects of being a leader in our school as well as leadership in general.

The agenda for year group meetings is directly linked to the areas of development identified by observations and through wider staff meetings. These meetings are facilitated by the assistant and deputy principals and have a practical classroom emphasis.

Each of the six teams hold meetings once a week during specialist class release time. These meetings focus specifically on learning and teaching within the team. The agenda is based on areas of need identified through the feedback from observations by the team leader or their year group leader. A major emphasis is on how to lift student achievement based on knowing where the students are at as a basis for ongoing teaching and learning. A key here is that the agenda is predominantly professional development or student progress based rather than organisational.

If there is a common need, the deputy principal coordinates in-school release for staff to participate in professional development. This will be taken either by skilled staff from within the school or external providers. We also have "walkabout" staff meetings three times a year where the teams are mixed across the school, we visit rooms, and teachers share their ideas on a particular focus. The goal here is not conformity but rather to appreciate what others are doing and to share techniques for improving teaching practice. Another example is that by having PRT's released on the same day the deputy principal can easily plan specific development sessions.

## Reflecting on team leadership

At the end of the year I take the team leaders in a one-day development programme at an out-of-school venue. It is important to me that I establish a professional and positive link with the team leaders.

The major focus of the agenda is on two aspects: school direction and developing the team leaders' role. Speakers have included a consultant who helped the team identify their leadership style and the implications of that in working with their team and the Mayor of New Plymouth giving his view on effective leadership and developing team work.

Ahead of the day the team leaders are given readings that examine what it means to be an effective leader. These are later

discussed. There is also close analysis of the pros and cons of each leader's current team, discussion around areas of focus for the following year, and what leadership style will be required to best meet team needs.

For me an important aspect of this day is seeing team leaders in action and observing their ability to constructively evaluate and analyse their own strengths and weaknesses (as well as each others') as leaders in their search to lift personal leadership capability.

Even though the process is ever-evolving, there have been a number of positives from this approach to leadership. Having the links of common focus between the meetings helps develop consistency across the school and avoids teachers being overwhelmed with a number of professional development initiatives. Staff across the school openly share their skills and ideas and leadership is seen as constructively lifting teaching and student achievement. Central to this though is the rapport established by the assistant and deputy principals with both the team leaders and classroom teachers with whom they work. Professional trust and respect at this beginning point is such an important ingredient for success. The next stage for our development is further refining both the feedback to teams and more accurate linking of student achievement and learning needs to specific teacher planning and implementation. It is through establishing teacher accuracy in developing programmes based on assessment and student needs that will see consistent progress across our school.

