Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change[1]
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Study Guide[2]

This study guide is designed as an easy reference to the key ideas and themes in each

chapter of the book as well as to explicitly link ideas to practical applications for leaders

in school settings. This guide offers the reader of *Building Strong School Cultures*

materials to enhance understanding and to support group discussion and individual

reflection about the ideas in the book.

[1] Kruse, S. D. & Louis, K. S. (2009). Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.
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Chapter 5

In the previous chapters we introduced actions that you could take to improve culture and create intensified leadership in your building. If we stopped there we would leave you with the impression that the responsibility for creating culture change resides primarily with you and your team. This is not, however, the whole picture. You need your own support network in order to do this work.

Key themes:

The important ideas included in this chapter are ideas about how networking can support the *culture change process* and how to *engage others* in networks.

   Peer Networks: Belonging to a peer network will sustain and support you as you move forward is important. There is a great deal of research substantiating the claim that membership in a group whose purpose is to foster action for school improvement will make a real difference in your capacity to lead and manage culture. Networks allow school leaders to *create connections among people with similar interests.* In particular, your web of relationships with other principals and stakeholders will have a critical impact on your ability to act as a transformational leader, focusing it on principles of quality and continuous improvement.

   Networks and culture change: Research on both individual and group learning suggests that powerful learning environments require "weak ties." Inventions in practice and other new ideas usually enter a person or school's consciousness because another person with whom they are only loosely connected introduces them. Your best friends and closest colleagues already know most of what you know – and vice versa. Although they may help you work through the details of "how to do it" because of their knowledge

of your setting, they are less likely to have to provide you with a genuinely new idea than someone you know less well. And if you only talk to the people you know best, you are less likely to change.

What tools will principals gain from being part of a larger network outside of the district or area in which his or her school is located? We know from research that principals are most effective when they act as "intellectual leaders" within their schools. At the same time, the power of principals to screen information that contributes to collective discussion and reflection in schools is also apparent: Principals set agendas for meetings (either formally or informally), often review the work of teacher professional development committees, and make decisions about articles to stuff in teacher's mail boxes.   Even schools that are well underway in implementing more broadly distributed or shared leadership models usually have principals who are both cheerleaders and gatekeepers for new ideas.

Recent research in shows the impact of networking on teacher's views of their principal as an intellectual leader.   In survey research, teachers in networked schools reported that they regarded their principal as active intellectual participants in discussions about school improvement and pedagogy, far more often than those in non-networked schools. Even more impressive, in the networked schools, 30% of the teachers identified dialogue with their principal as a major influence on their classroom practice – as contrasted with 10% of the teachers in a project with similar goals, but without the support of networks (Scherp, 2007).

Lorna Earl and Steven Katz also conclude that access to external expertise – not only the collective experiences of other principals, but also a network facilitators, who

were often engaged scholars from universities –increased the ability of the participants to be effective intellectual leaders within their staff. As they suggest, the big change that comes from network participation is to help leaders to understand their schools as places where people think about their work, and develop and apply knowledge (Earl & Katz, 2006). In sum, there is powerful evidence that networks are highly effective at facilitating culture change, moving schools in the direction of becoming learning organizations, and creative more effective collaborative leadership in which the principal is seen as a transformational intellectual leader.

      Engaging in networks: Since networks can help you get where you want to go, it is important to understand how to be part of a network. The first step is to look for the resources around you that can build on resources that you already have. Here is a list of suggestions:

- *Build on what you already have.* If you already have a set of colleagues that you trust and feel compatible with, suggest that you meet more formally to discuss new ideas and problems of practice. Make sure that there is a clear agenda and "real work" so that your time together doesn't become a gripe session!

- *See what the district might do.* Most districts have become aware that professional development opportunities for principals have lagged behind what is needed. If you work in a small district, ask the Superintendent to find colleagues who might be interested in sponsoring a network; if you are in a large district, ask for funds to develop a professional community for administrators.

- *Turn to a local university.* If you have contacts with faculty members who are interested in school improvement, the chances are that they will already have

begun to be interested in networking and professional communities. Perhaps they would be willing to act as a facilitator in getting a group started, finding a place to meet, and making contacts with other researchers who might be interested in engaging with your group.

- *Turn to your state professional association*. Most professional associations are also becoming aware of the importance of networking, and may be able to find grant funds to foster networks, either "virtual" or physical, that extend beyond the usual meetings.

- *Find a virtual community*. We can make no recommendations about this because the reality of the web is that it is ever changing. We do know that finding these networks is not simple, and we hope that they will grow rapidly in the future.

Why are these ideas important?

The overall message here is rather straightforward and can be broken down into four key ideas.

1. You are inevitably part of a network of groups and organizations that you influence and that influence you.

2. Strong networks can support you in your professional development, by providing strategic and short-term help as you confront problems in developing your school's culture and intensifying leadership.

3. Given a policy context that increasingly presses for simple benchmarks and assumes that leaders can "control" learning outcomes, a support network is important to sustaining your emotional and intellectual energy.
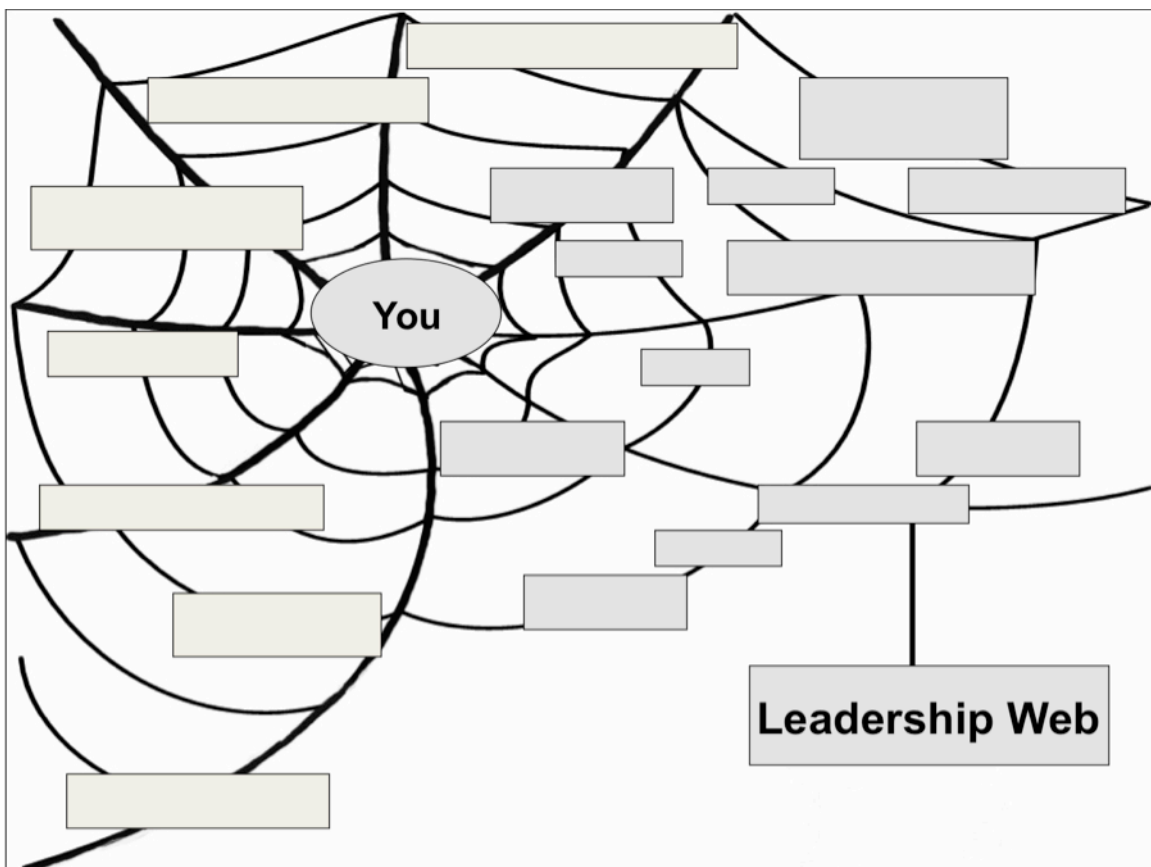
4. You can work on these issues with colleagues in your school, but you will find that your outlook and success "at home" will be enhanced by sustained connections with peers who are struggling with similar decision contexts and pressures.

Questions, Discussion and Reflection Activities for Chapter 5

Individual Reflections

Create your own leadership web. Draw a web that identifies the supportive resources available to you.

- Which do you use most often? Least often? Why?
- How might you work to tap the resources available to you in more productive ways? Consider others who are not currently part of your network, but might be useful partners. How might they be added?
- Identify groups or individuals in your web that support your leadership. How can you make the most of those relationships with other network members to maximize their effects on you and your leadership?
- Identify groups or individuals in your web that may inhibit your leadership. How can you develop relationships that may minimize their effects?

Group Discussion: (Use your individual reflections to help guide your group discussion)

- In what ways has belonging to a network enhanced your practice?

- What aspects of networking have been most productive?

- In what ways has your leadership practice evolved or improved because of involvement in a network?

- In cases where networking has proved less productive what inhibited those opportunities? How might those same limitations be prevented in future networks?

- Using this book-study as the starting point, invite 3-5 other principals you know to join an in person or on-line network.
    - Find someone who can help facilitate the group. If at all possible, this person should be "neutral" (a university faculty member or a sympathetic administrator from your district.)
    - Set explicit goals for becoming a supportive learning community and a commitment to meet.
    - Develop a variety of topics for discussion and solicit ideas from other principals.
    - Meet at least once a month, and treat the meetings as "sacred time."