ThoughtExchange

HOW TO WIN AT EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Engage Your Community to Drive Positive Change

Being an effective educational leader is challenging—but you've got the solution. Tap into your community's collective intelligence to solve your district's most pressing issues. See how ThoughtExchange is helping leaders win by developing cultures of inclusion, empathy, and collaboration.

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5 Differences Between Solitary vs Collaborative Leaders

SELENA MCLACHLAN

At first glance, it may look like solitary leadership has served the corporate culture well since the beginning of the industrial revolution. And, looking back over the past century in a world of predominantly manufacturing, it may have worked well. It allowed executives to understand the market and make quick decisions based on information they didn't consider important to employees at the bottom of the org chart.

However, over the past few decades, and especially now seeing the effects of global trade and world events like the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves amidst the information age – the digital era– where the hybrid workplace is becoming the norm and newer approaches to leadership have started to take form; and thankfully take hold.

We're no longer standing on the factory floor making one widget for one purpose. Nor are we sitting around a boardroom table afraid to speak up, waiting for our managers to decide what we should do. Increasingly, we are working remotely and thinking as teams, multi-tasking and lending our talents where they make the most sense

and add the most value – even if they take us outside of our job descriptions. And this newer style of working most definitely requires a newer style of leadership.

Thankfully, the collaborative leader we've chosen to be, is quickly becoming the type of leader everyone aspires to be. For some of us it's in our DNA. For others, we need to keep working on it.

We all know that leading collaboratively can sometimes slow things down, or complicate what we might think are simple decisions. Yet we also know that it's well worth the effort, and that our decisions are better as a result of involving others who are impacted, and we get stronger buy-in.

But when the pressure is on and we think for a fleeting moment that it might be easy to just go it alone, let's remind ourselves why we do it and look for signs that we might be slipping back to the industrial ages. Here are five tell-tale differences:

1. Power

SOLITARY LEADERS

Solitary leaders tend to approach power as a single point of authority, believing that their power is derived from their authority. Often this old-school mentality bestows power based purely on tenure and status. So the longer you stay with your organization, and the further up the ladder you progress, the greater your power.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Collaborative leaders recognize that power is greatest in a collective team. That you don't give up power, but rather become more powerful. By encouraging equal participation across all levels, the best solutions simply come from the best ideas – whichever corner of the room they come from – taking a team approach to problem-solving.

2. Information

SOLITARY LEADERS

Maintaining information ownership is a hallmark of old-school leaders. Information is power. Releasing information on a "need to know" basis allows traditional leaders to maintain authority and control.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Open information sharing is the cornerstone of collaborative leadership. Getting everyone on the same page requires everyone to have access to the same information. Creative approaches to problem-solving are significantly strengthened by sharing information at the corporate level and encouraging it at cross-departmental levels.

3. Idea Generation

SOLITARY LEADERS

These leaders may be open to suggestions and ideas from their team, but more often decisions come from the top. In fact, with key pieces of business information often withheld, team members missing this context would be hard-pressed to generate strategic thoughts and ideas even if they wanted to.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Collaboration gives everyone on the team a voice. And as the old saying goes, two heads – or better yet, a whole room full – ultimately lead to better ideas, solutions and decisions. Team members feel empowered to contribute their thoughts and ideas, because their leaders are genuinely open to them and strongly encourage cross-pollination.

4. Resolving issues

SOLITARY LEADERS

Solitary leaders often deal with issues on an individual basis with no regard to the root cause of the problem. This means that, rather than senior management being able to focus their energy on creating systemic, beneficial change that could prevent issues from arising in the future, they are consumed by fighting fires in the now.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

The basis of collaborative leadership is trust and delegation. Because leaders give team members more responsibility for their work, they're often more involved in the process. Collaborative leaders look for the root cause of conflict as it arises, and address solutions quickly to keep work moving forward.

5. Rules, roles, and responsibilities

SOLITARY LEADERSHIP

Organizations with old-school cultures tend to rely on a series of rules, regulations and a hierarchy that forces team leads to adhere to specific roles and responsibilities for both themselves and their teams. This can grossly limit the creative process and result in individuals working in silos, without the benefit of group ideation or perspective.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

In a collaborative environment teams are encouraged to work together, cross-functionally. They share, information, resources, knowledge, time, and effort. This allows roles and responsibilities to evolve and fluctuate based on the greater good. Collaboration is at the heart of our work at ThoughtExchange. But we don't all need to develop collaborative software and processes for a living, to enjoy the benefits of a collaborative culture. In fact, these benefits are not limited to work environments either. Collaboration can strengthen relationships outside the office too. It can be equally as effective in your home, on the field, and in our schools.

Next time you're under pressure to make a decision that might tempt you to go solo, remember all the times you came out with better solutions and stronger ideas being a collaborative leader, partner, parent, coach, and teacher!

How Education Leaders are Using Technology to Build Cultures of Empathy

DR. ANN SKELCHER,
CONSULTANT

It's 7pm. The chairs are out, the signage placed, the muffins arranged, and the coffee is brewing. We sit and wait for the public to arrive. Tonight's focus is on making changes to our student reporting process, and how to communicate more effectively about student learning and parent support. We've advertised this meeting in our newsletter and on our website. The topic is so important, we think that parents will be inspired to attend. But when 7pm arrives and only five parents have joined, we're left wondering whether the subject actually matters to the community.

Remember those days? That was in 2018, before COVID-19 changed everything and when we still conducted in-person meetings. Looking back through the lens of a 34-year career in education, had we stopped to reflect on what was happening in the homes of our families during that time, we might have come to a different conclusion. Even before the pandemic, working families juggled many responsibilities, and sometimes life's necessities kept even the most engaged parents from attending important meetings. Single parents often couldn't find or afford the child care they needed to participate. And newsletters often got lost: either crumpled in the bottom of a backpack or overlooked amidst a crammed inbox.

As principal, I recognized the importance of community involvement. So, I collectively worked with my staff to find new ways to bring more stakeholders into the conversation about necessary changes to the student experience. After a few failed attempts and some focused dialogue with staff, we shifted our perspective from a place of judgment to one of empathy: "What do we need to do differently to help parents engage with us?"

Hearing from diverse voices

Pre-pandemic, many actions from that process remained standard practices in school districts. We hosted fun events and moved meetings into the community to make them more accessible. Our community noticed we were making an effort, saw that we valued them, and realized we were working to better understand their experience. Relationships grew, and over time, so did participation. Our attitude change gradually helped create a more cohesive and friendly school community.

However, we still struggled with bringing diverse voices into meaningful group conversations. Despite the good work we'd done to engage people, it was still hard for many to attend meetings. Of those who did attend, some were afraid to speak up and participate in the decision-making process.

I reflect on my past now from a place of understanding. As a Senior Engagement Consultant with ThoughtExchange, I see how school districts are overcoming communication challenges by finding new ways to connect with people and build their community on a foundation of empathy.

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> **"** The "me of 20 years ago" would have scoffed at that idea. How can people come together, learn from each other and build empathy online? But I have learned that technology can help leaders bring their community together.

How technology can create empathy at scale

Hearing from a variety of voices has always been a challenge for school districts, and a goal that has been largely impossible—until recently. Today's technology is giving educators and their communities new ways to approach challenging issues.

The "me of 20 years ago" would have scoffed at that idea. How can people come together, learn from each other and build empathy online? But I have learned that technology can help leaders bring their community together. Here's how.

1. Building participation
Today's parents want to be more engaged than ever, but the pandemic has made it difficult to participate in person. And pandemic aside, parents are busy! Getting people to show up at public meetings has always been difficult, but now, in many districts, it's not an option. Online public meetings have some of the same issues in-person meetings have. Those who do show up can get drowned out by louder voices.

Using mobile and online technology to connect with people is convenient and can dramatically increase the number of stakeholders school districts can reach. It can also increase the diversity of perspectives captured by getting beyond the loudest voices and giving people an equal opportunity to participate.

By letting people participate in a safe way that fits their lives, you demonstrate respect and empathy. What's more, by providing meaningful opportunities for participation, you show people you value their input. Because of that,

they are more likely to respond to the next invitation to engage.

2. Creating safe space
One of the biggest reasons people fail to speak out at public events, whether digital or in person, is fear. People are often afraid to be seen or singled out because they have a potentially unpopular perspective that might create conflict.

They may also feel intimidated to share their views in front of a group of education "experts," or generally feel uncomfortable speaking in public. And, while social media can provide useful ways to get people to look at information, they tend to be ineffective platforms for productive conversations.

Participating in a moderated, confidential online discussion lets everyone share what's on their minds and in their hearts. It also serves to minimize peer bias, because participants respond only to the ideas and perspectives shared, without being swayed by who shared them. Finally, the confidentiality technology affords can create discussions with minimal conflict. This virtually eliminates fear and creates the potential for civil, productive online conversations.

3. Hearing from each other
It's no surprise that people who live in the same community can share radically different perspectives on the same topics. The challenge for leaders is bringing together these people who don't see eye-to-eye around common visions and major changes in school districts. Having people genuinely hear and consider each other's perspectives can be challenging. Parents who attend meetings have the strongest opinions, and this motivates them to be there. The group with the capacity to attend meetings often shares a collective voice that doesn't always represent that of the community.
Amongst the missing voices are introverts, parents who

themselves struggled in school, single parents, indigenous voices, or the voices of people of color. And we may not discover these voices are missing until we start to take action and experience resistance from other members of the community.

Technology provides the opportunity for educators to reach beyond a small and often narrowly focused group to the broader community. The safe space created by a confidential, moderated online discussion becomes the perfect place for people to consider other people's thoughts without any influencing factors. Developing an understanding of why others believe what they do can result in people coming together around issues in new and unexpected ways.

4. Responsive leadership

When it comes to community engagement, I've learned that people are much more likely to trust and cooperate with leaders when they **feel they've been heard**. When leaders show they're listening and are genuinely concerned about constituent perspectives, communities respond with increased confidence and trust in leadership. Accurately reporting back to stakeholders validates participants' efforts and shows they play a valued role in the school or district.

Collecting, collating, and sharing input gathered through public meetings or focus groups is time-consuming, costly and an imperfect process. Even if districts could significantly boost meeting attendance and participation, the process of interpreting the data and effectively communicating it back to the community would make it impractical.

Comparatively, data from online discussions are easy to collect. And today's data analysis and visualization technologies allow you to analyze the results quickly, pull out the top insights shared and use them to inform actions.

This both reduces the chances of community input sitting untouched on the edge of your desk waiting for you to find the time to make sense of the information you gathered,

and makes it easy to effectively communicate back to your community.

The key to bringing polarized people together is discovering the interests and values that are behind positional statements, and where those common interests intersect.

5. Underlying interests

All too often, the discussions we have in schools and districts focus on differences of opinion.

The key to bringing polarized people together is discovering the interests and values that are behind positional statements, and where common interests intersect. Doing this in a meeting, whether it's online or in-person, is nearly impossible, and Likert-style surveys make discovering interests a guessing game.

Gathering more qualitative data through an online conversation and leveraging today's best data analysis technology can help you identify common interests that can be agreed upon even by people who have vastly different priorities.

The key to student success

The "me of today" feels so lucky to have the chance to see productive community engagement. Technology provides educators and their communities opportunities to pose challenging questions, and give voice to many perspectives in a way that creates a dialogue that brings people together. For educational leaders and school staff, this provides the ability to develop plans and make decisions that are well-supported and thus highly impactful on the future of all students.

Community engagement is key to student and public school success – some would say survival. It matters now more than ever. The necessary changes happening require all stakeholders to participate — to truly have a stake — in the change process. Technology can provide that opportunity.

5 Ways to Use ThoughtExchange to Drive Inclusion & Empathy in Your Community

DAVE MACLEOD,
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, THOUGHTEXCHANGE

We founded ThoughtExchange with the vision that, with the right structure, leaders could use technology to bring people together in ways never before possible.

From the beginning, we've focused on major, system-wide challenges such as "How do you get thousands of people in large, complex organizations to contribute, learn from each other, and know they're being heard—when it comes to big decisions that affect them?"

We're proud that since then, we've helped our customers engage millions of people in Exchanges around critical decisions, on topics ranging from facilities funding to human rights and trauma healing. And this inspiring part of our business is growing every day.

A solution for everyday challenges

At the same time, we've been working behind the scenes to build a complementary solution for a different but equally important problem: How can you help a leader quickly and effectively inform decisions affecting groups of people, and do it at scale? This is especially important during these unprecedented times, where many organizations have gone remote or hybrid due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So on the one hand, as Canadians, we are humble and overly apologetic by nature. But sorry, eh! We are also

EXTREMELY PROUD to share that leaders across North America are having success using our software. And they're doing it all on their own: having fast, bias-free group conversations on topics that matter to their organizations.

So, I wanted to take a moment to share some questions our customers have asked their stakeholders using ThoughtExchange and how they've been successful in implementing their results. We hope these examples inspire you to involve more people in decisions that affect them.

Discovering best practices

EXCHANGE QUESTION
What are some best practices at your site you'd like to share with other leaders?

In large organizations, getting people together to talk about best practices can be expensive and time-consuming. Our customers use Exchanges to ask this question and gather ideas from across large, diverse groups of people. They then take the best insights into smaller meetings, where they discuss and learn from them. Participants report feeling energized and excited by the new ideas and are happy to contribute their thoughts in a way that works for them.

Hiring the right leaders and setting them up for success

EXCHANGE QUESTION

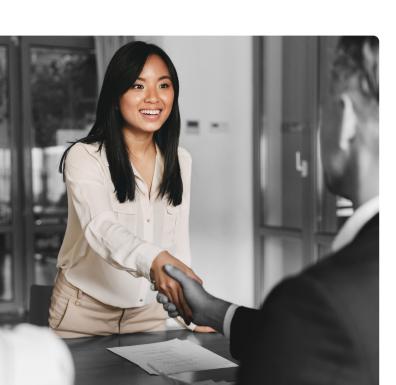*What are the most important qualities we want to see in our new leader?*

This question allows those affected by a newly hired leader to share what matters to them in that leadership role before that role gets filled. Participant feedback shows people feel respected and valued. And new leaders feel that having insight into the group's expectations is priceless when stepping into a new role. (We use this one pretty regularly here at ThoughtExchange).

Here's what one leader had to say about this important question:

> " "Not only did it lead to a better profile, but the employees were deeply engaged. As a result, they took ownership in the success of the new principal, which led to a better onboarding. Lastly, it **gave their new leader a strategic advantage** from the start because some of the 'cultural DNA' of that particular team had already been mapped."
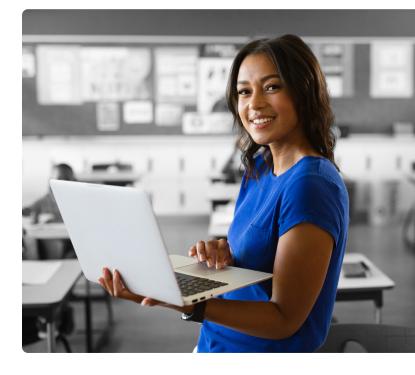>
> — DR. QUINTIN SHEPHERD, SUPERINTENDENT

Changing physical environments

EXCHANGE QUESTION

What is important to you about our new space?

Moving people around and designing a space can be a time-consuming and expensive exercise in consensus building. Everyone has different ideas about what matters most. But you need to eventually create one unified solution.

Our customers have used this question to find common ground on the most important issues related to changing people's physical environment. It allows everyone to feel heard and also empathize with other points of view. Participants report increased understanding of other perspectives and appreciate that leaders listen to their concerns.

Discovering training needs and building engagement

EXCHANGE QUESTION

What are some things you want to get out of our upcoming training?

Gathering expectations and hopes is a great way to uncover blind spots and build buy-in for time spent together during training. Leaders using this question report a deeper understanding of what's important and where there is resistance. Participants are frequently more engaged in the events and retain more of the training because they helped design them.

Improving resources

EXCHANGE QUESTION
What are your thoughts, both positive and negative, about this resource so we can improve it?

Training manuals and other resources often contain critical information, but getting people to truly engage with the material can be challenging. By bringing together the people using the resource and asking for their feedback upfront, leaders can gain support and improve the resource.

One customer who used this Exchange question learned what mattered most to everyone who would be using the resource, and the participants reported feeling more invested in the initiative as it was rolled out.

> " "It was a really fast turnaround on everything that we needed. It was brilliant in terms of how simple it was, how clear it was and it was easy to read."
>
> **— GARY STROTHER, CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT, CALGARY CATHOLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The tip of the iceberg

These five examples are the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to how you can use ThoughtExchange to make progress on hard issues and everyday challenges. And I'm really thankful that people are inventing new ways to engage every day.

What challenges are impacting your district and how could getting community input quickly and at scale address them? **Contact one of our Education experts** to see how we can help.