A high-performing administrative team must be mentored by the principal to meet its potential and act in concert with the vision and goals of the school.

**By Dianna M. Lindsay**

The success of any school depends, in part, upon the purposeful mentoring of the administrative team by the principal. A successful, high-performing administrative team needs deliberate, purposeful, and conscientious efforts by the principal to meet its potential and to act in concert with the vision and goals of the school.

The camaraderie, management, leadership, and decision-making skills of the administrative team are key to the harmony of the school. However, principals rarely publicly discuss their efforts to hone the administrative team's skills. Through a positive esprit de corps, respectful language, professional expertise, cooperative personal and professional relationships, and a trusting collegial outlook, the administrative team can improve faculty morale and expertise, increase the likelihood that students will succeed, build a positive school climate and culture, and increase parental and community confidence in the school.

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Building an Effective Team

There are 12 actions that can guide you in building and sustaining a strong and effective administrative team. When you begin to build or evaluate your team, first check to see if you have addressed these items.

1. **Create an entry plan.**

Each new person on any administrative team, regardless of his or her title or role, needs an entry plan. The entry plan should be collaboratively created by the administrative team and should allow new employees to understand the complexities of the institution and successfully fulfill their duties. The entry plan should provide new members with the opportunity to meet people who will play an essential role in helping them complete their responsibilities. The plan should provide new team members with key questions, important contacts, printed data, and any other relevant information. The entry plan is also a statement about what the leadership team deems valuable and is an exciting way to welcome new team members to a new learning and social environment.

2. **Create regular team time.**

Setting aside time for regular weekly meetings is an essential success factor for any administrative team. A regularly scheduled meeting time honors the work of the school’s leaders and facilitates good communication and appropriate decision making among the team members. These meetings also update team members on recent events and ensure the smooth operation of the school’s daily activities and special events. In addition, weekly administrative team meetings provide all school employees with formal access to the decisionmakers. Scheduling weekly meetings with a yearlong calendar of dates creates effective long-term planning that is predictable, dependable, and loyal to the operations of the team.

3. **Prepare agendas in advance of meetings.**

Preparing and distributing agendas before meetings ensures that the administrators who are responsible for reporting on a topic or issue are prepared for the meeting. The agenda should include input by all team members. To facilitate this responsibility, all secretaries to the administrative team should know when agenda items are due to the principal. Agendas should be divided into sections for announcements, unfinished business, new business, discussion items, and action items. Topics that are best handled by e-mail messages or personal appointments should be excluded from the leadership team agenda.

4. **Make meeting time useful.**

Using the reflective and analytical skills of the administrative team to assist other members of the group with professional conundrums is an efficient use of time and allows team members to view themselves as collaborative problem solvers. Struggling with an institutional issue as a team can solve problems more quickly, build compassion, strengthen the school’s mission, provide insights, and aid team members in understanding the big picture confronting the administrative team. The discussion and debate process is an opportunity to seek compromises that validate the opinions of team members and enhance communication for all. Team meetings are opportunities for the principal to talk to the group, listen to the ideas and concerns of others, and observe the quality of feedback given to peers.
5. Teach at all meetings.
Leadership meetings frequently begin with a reflective or inspirational teaching opportunity. In faith-based institutions, the text may be associated with a particular religious philosophy. In public institutions, the principal may focus “the lesson” on the words of great teachers or leaders who embody the virtues that he or she respects. The moral and ethical principles selected by the leader—and enhanced by an institution’s philosophy—are important conduits to virtue-based conversations, which are frequently missing from team meetings. A simple quote, a dense paragraph from an important text, a lesson observed in the school, or a selection of poetry or music can inspire hope in those who lead and enhance the overall relationships of team members. Lessons of hope motivate and inspire people; they also cause people to take action and reflect on their contributions to a school and its ideals. Opening meetings with lessons from spiritual or inspirational sources may help combine a tough-minded ideal with a tender-hearted action.

6. Establish formal leadership training.
Formal leadership training for the administrative team is as essential as pedagogical training is for faculty members. Leadership education is a way to evaluate and reconsider the goals of the school. Administrative team members, like all adults in the school, want to be included in decisions and learning opportunities that enhance the ability of all students to meet their potential. Formal leadership training increases personal self-worth and enhances the goals of the school. Using excellent summer and yearly special-topic institutes—the Summer Institute at Harvard’s Principals’ Center, for example—increases the team’s general knowledge; cements school goals; and augments common language about assessment, learning, school safety, and pedagogical skills.

7. Plan appropriate retreats.
The administrative team deserves to use its time efficiently and to be treated well. Holding mini-retreats (i.e., half-day) at the principal’s home followed by dinner is an exciting way to facilitate longer conversations and enhance fellowship. In addition, beginning the year with a two-day, off-campus retreat with others in leadership roles, such as department heads or division leaders, can create needed cross departmental/divisional conversations and reinvigorate leadership commitments. Consider requiring the administrative team to read and discuss professional literature that matches the vision, goals, and assessment objectives of the school. Use Socratic seminar methodology to facilitate total involvement and provide a pedagogical example for administrators to experience personally.

8. Make all meetings efficient.
Using everyone’s time efficiently should be an essential agreement or pledge of the team. Time together is indeed the chief currency of a strong team. Investing in the group and respecting everyone’s time means that team members are disciplined enough not to create conflicts with scheduled meetings, arrive on time for team meetings, review agendas before the sessions, and stay on topic during the meetings. A timekeeper may facilitate the efficient use of everyone’s time; however, efficiency should not replace the process time necessary for rich, reflective conversation and good decision making.
When considering a major decision, the administrative team should be assembled to confer about issues requiring serious group review. The wider the range of opinions, the more likely the principal will cull out a wise and defendable decision that has widespread support. When any major decision is rendered, remember to thank people for thinking through options from their areas of expertise. The role of the principal should be that of chief communicator, both with the administrative team and the school community. Encouraging involvement in decision making is a key factor in establishing trust and commitment within a team.

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10. Honor the past.
Ask the administrative team about the past. Knowing how a school evolved helps team members understand the multifaceted complexities of an issue, an idea, or an action and helps administrators understand their important place in a school’s evolution. In addition, honoring the work done in the past respects those at the table who may have been part of that work. Again, such respect enhances the work and efforts of the current team and highlights individual members’ connection to the future.

11. March with the people.
When individual members of the administrative team want to speak with the principal, immediately taking the time to listen is essential. A smile, attentive nonverbal gestures, and clarifying questions can go far in helping team members know that they matter. Meeting with fellow administrators in their offices also adds to a sense of team camaraderie. Individual administrative team members should feel free to deliver any message to the principal, including bad news or information that could be difficult for the principal to hear.

12. Remind team members of their important role.
Whenever possible, remind the team members how important they are. Frequent thank-you notes can be important for team morale. When the principal models and reinforces expectations for the team, he or she increases the possibility that the team will function well together. The administrative team is a creative group that needs nurturing as well as feedback. Setbacks are inevitable in all teamwork, but when an administrative team is strong in mutual respect and trust, it can endure the setbacks.

A Visionary Path
An administrative team must embody the positive ideals of its school’s vision through its public statements and its private conference-room behaviors. By attending to the emotional and intellectual needs of the administrative team, a principal increases its capacity to help lead the school toward its vision and improved achievement for all students. PL.