

# The Case of Collaborative Leadership: Empowering Your Leader

eJewish Philanthropy  
December 7, 2016



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[This is the seventh and concluding article in our “effective collaboration” [series](#), written by alumni of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary. The Davidson School recently launched the [Leadership Commons](#), which is a project of The Davidson School dedicated to building educational leadership that works together to create a vibrant Jewish future.]

I was invited by the head of a Jewish day school I had been working with, who was only four months into his tenure, to join a meeting of the educational leadership team. The agenda, developed by team members, was guided by the director of the elementary grades. When debriefing with the head of school, he noted that having his department directors rotate discussion and note-taking responsibilities during meetings enabled him to be a more effective listener, as well as to know his team more deeply and contribute more thoughtfully.

He wasn’t juggling these roles with “running the meeting.” He promoted shared ownership of the agenda and meeting time by distributing his own responsibilities. This also strengthened the facilitation skills of his team members as they worked with their departments and divisions.

**This head of school and others I had observed granted major leadership responsibility to their teams in order to encourage strategic approaches to educational questions. They empowered others through models of distributive leadership, engaging them in questions of instruction and values.**

Those of us who have worked at DSLTI (the Day School Leadership Training Institute) have long embraced the belief that **the head of school is the lead educator and is the keeper of the school's Jewish educational mission and vision.** The budgetary priorities, for example, reflect the values of the school. By embracing the models advanced in professional literature, we have encouraged our heads to:

- Keep the students and their educational experiences as the central focus of their work and decisions.
- Promote and reinforce a collaborative and collegial school culture in which students, teachers, and parents are heard and valued.
- Lead with self-reflection, Jewish ethics, morality, and humility.
- Commit to continuous improvement and perpetual learning for themselves and their colleagues.

This model has not always been in fashion. As economic and enrollment pressures have mounted in many settings, the role of the head of school has shifted to external work, sometimes resembling that of an executive director with strong development skills. While I acknowledge that the role of the head requires skilled focus on fund-raising, budget oversight, and working with lay leaders, the head must also be grounded in mission and vision with the lens of a Jewish educator providing focus. When we neglect the head's role as instructional leader, we are in danger of sacrificing the *nehshamah* (soul) of the school.

It is in the context of these foundations that I have been fascinated by – and value – the findings of the study *Leadership in Context: The Conditions for Success of Jewish Day School Leaders* ([cited](#) in *eJewishPhilanthropy*, 11/20/16), which identifies three domains of leadership practice critical to creating and sustaining high-quality educational programs: promoting vision for Jewish living and learning, enabling teachers' learning and professional growth, and interacting with the school community. The researchers' findings, based on survey responses from 304 schools and interviews with 87 heads and division directors, offer insights that can guide our vision of Jewish day school leadership specifically and Jewish educational leadership more broadly. The findings give us direction on ways to define positions and to prepare and sustain the efforts of an educational director. Several that have caught my attention include:

- The importance of building a relationship with staff for buy-in of vision and values.
- The need for the head or members of the leadership team to provide time for instructional leadership and to promote educator growth, if we are to fulfill visions of Jewish living and learning, and if there is to be a quality educational program.
- The need for heads both to offer educator professional development opportunities and to participate in programs that will promote their own growth.
- The value of connections to multiple constituencies so that the execution of the school or organization's mission can align with that of the community.

- Perhaps most important, the need for time management through delegation to a leadership team and empowering others to make decisions.

As the example that opens this piece and the foundations of DSLTI suggest, we've long known the value of collaboration and the importance of a lead educator who guides instructional practice. This research underscores this point further and encourages us to move from theory to practice. It is not always easy, as I was reminded by another head of a small school with whom I'd worked to set up a distributive leadership model. She noted how hard it is to move from delegation to genuine trust. We must ask:

- How can we work with lay leaders to support leadership models that allow the head of school or organizational executive to be the voice and model of the mission and vision? How can we ensure that time and resources are allocated to develop leadership teams and meaningful professional development paths for their staffs?
- How do we prioritize professional growth and trusted communities of practices for leaders so that they can think strategically about matching mission to the journeys of their communities? What are the emerging gathering places for ideas to be explored?

At the Leadership Commons of The Davidson School, we're actively pursuing questions about collaborative leadership and are finding the intersection that links vision with instructional and external responsibilities. We hope you'll participate in discussions with us and join us at a session focused on the *Leadership in Context* research at the Prizmah Day School Conference, on February 5-7 in Chicago. This is a critical opportunity for sustaining and nourishing the professional lives of our day school heads by offering collaborative models of professional growth and leadership.

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