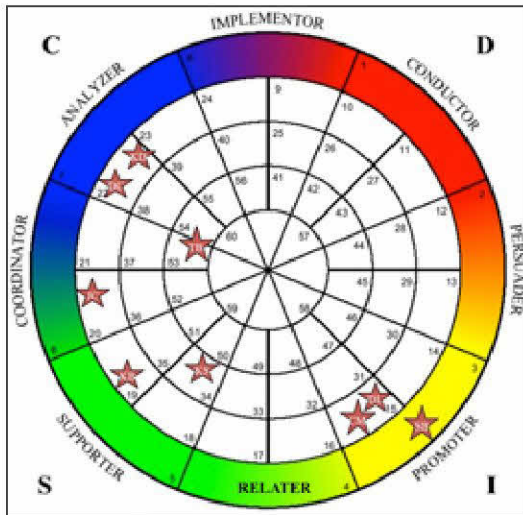


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Four Steps to Building Leadership Capacity

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While leadership is often recognized as an important factor in school improvement, the ability of district (or school) leaders to help those around them to also take on leadership roles is gaining more attention. And when it comes to building leadership capacity in one's "leadership team," understanding leadership styles is key.

Since 2006, [Future Management Systems](#) has been gathering and analyzing leadership data on 550 school leaders, including principals, administrators, and school board members. Our analysis supports the premise that a principal or superintendent who knows how to build capacity for change has a much better chance of sustained improvement than one who leads from a top-down stance.

We have also identified four steps that can greatly assist principals or superintendents looking to enhance the capacity of their leadership team in order to attain system goals in instruction, management, community relations, fiscal management, and human resource development.

Step 1: Leaders examine their own leadership style. In our work, school leaders use three well-regarded tools: the [Myers Briggs Type Indicator \(MBTI\)](#), the [DISC Behaviors profile \(DISC\)](#), and a values inventory called the [Personal Motivation and Engagement tool](#). Although they are rarely used in the education sector, hundreds of companies in health care, high technology, real estate, airlines, and manufacturing use these tools, which have been validated by research studies for use in hiring and team development. To summarize them briefly, the MBTI provides a leadership profile on your problem solving style at work and in life, the DISC indicates your natural behavior and how you adapt to the workplace, and the values inventory shows values that define who you are.

A trained human resource specialist or other certified professional can review this data and help leaders understand their problem-solving styles, their behaviors at work, and their value systems. This analysis enables leaders to better understand the patterns of behavior that make them successful and the areas that can derail their attempts to achieve the results they desire. Are they too top-down in their leadership, creating an environment where people are afraid to offer new ideas or are worried about retribution for expressing their point of view? Are they too sensitive to personnel issues and therefore holding back from making tough decisions concerning staff? Are they so detailed or compliance oriented that they are neglecting to delegate? Is their tendency to be analytical about data preventing them from actually making decisions? Once leaders know and are comfortable thinking and talking about their own style openly and honestly, other team members can provide feedback for improvement.

Step 2: Leaders review the leadership profile of their team. Ideally, once principals or superintendents know and understand their leadership style, they can develop a profile for their leadership team using these same tools. In a school system, this team includes the business manager, special education director, principals, grants management director, human resource director, and assistant superintendents. In a school, the team can include union leaders, teacher leaders or department heads, assistant principals, and parent leadership. The idea here is to build on strengths and identify gaps within the team.

In one underperforming district we worked with, for example, the leadership team DISC profile identified a team composed of Coordinators and Analyzers, Supporters, and even a few Promoters, but lacked an Implementor or Conductor type leader ([see graphic](#)). This team had a vision for school improvement and were supportive of each other, but lacked someone to drive change and improvement as well as someone who would make sure the group followed through with plans. To address this gap, meetings structured around clear identification of action steps as well as targeted professional development and coaching were put in place. At this point, the leader could determine if the team was balanced, with enough people who would lead change and enough who would prefer to be in support roles. In addition, the gaps showed where professional development and coaching could be beneficial in adding the needed skills to the team for maximum results.

Step 3: Leaders commit to an ongoing process. The superintendent or principal needs to commit to an ongoing process of building a leadership team. This includes building a safe environment for open and honest discussion on all issues, including those that seem untouchable—such as why the athletic director is not held to the same student achievement standards as other administrators. Teams need to tackle short- and long-term challenges by developing, for example, three-year strategic plans to keep them on track. Ideally, the team will become more self-directed in meeting goals and will learn how to hold members accountable for their performance on the team. In districts committed to building leadership capacity, we have seen that a teacher can be very valuable in helping a colleague take responsibility for learning new skills, while a union representative can have ideas for how to bring other teachers on board with a new initiative. It is the secure principal who knows and understands each individual's style, and who encourages and supports other team members' leadership activities.

Step 4: Leaders maintain a positive culture of change despite barriers. In analyzing the median scores of the DISC profile, we have found that the education leaders who accomplish their goals, build strong leadership teams, and continually focus on improved student achievement score high in the Influence and Dominant behaviors and low in Steadiness and Compliance. In practice, this means these leaders are coaches, team builders, and systemic thinkers who delegate compliance tasks and build teams and leadership capacity in their schools. They are determined to move quickly on change and improvement efforts and implement what they believe will get results. Through professional development and coordination with other team members, leaders with a variety of profiles can be successful—but first they must become aware of how they lead.

Skilled leaders who can build high-performance cultures that attain measureable results make everyone around them successful—including teachers, union leaders, and others—and encourage improvement in all aspects of leadership. They build capacity for sustained improvement.

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