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Skillful Intentional Leadership

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Introduction

One afternoon I was about to start a meeting with a principal when I noticed another man sidle up to him, scribbling rapidly. The principal smiled and explained, “Don’t mind Joe. He is doing a study to see how many minutes a day I spend on instructional tasks.” Aside from wanting to make sure that the time I spent with this principal ended up in the right column of Joe’s notebook, I got to thinking: *What if Joe recorded the number of minutes that educators spend on instructional talk in team meetings?*

A quick Google search could not point me to a study showing a national average for time spent in school meetings, but basic math can lead us to a good working number. If on average a team meets once a week for 50 minutes, then the minimum amount of time that team is together is almost 2,000 minutes a school year. And more often than not, teams meet more frequently, and educators are on multiple teams, which can put their individual time working in groups at upward of 4,000 minutes a year. That is a lot of time, considering most teachers get 22 minutes a day for lunch. Maybe the better question for Joe is: *What are the outcomes of all that talk?*

When I first work with a school, educators in the room inevitably think of me as “the team lady.” *She’s here to work with leaders to help our professional learning community teams be more productive. She’s going to help our multi-grade-level team align curriculum. She’s going to teach us how to manage people who show resistance.* While leadership of teams might be what I do, what I am about is learning. Teaming is the vehicle; student learning is always the outcome. Results such as improved team productivity, better curriculum alignment, and heightened teacher collegiality are each very important, but getting good at these things is not the ultimate outcome we are after. At the end of the day, a team must positively impact students’ learning.

With experience over a span of nearly 30 years leading school teams, as well as coaching team leaders and the people who support them, I’ve learned that not all groups reach this outcome. (If you’ve picked up this book, you likely know it, too.) I am constantly struck by the fact that two teams, even within the same school, can go through the same motions of setting norms, writing agendas, planning for goals, facilitating protocols, and so on, but only one of those teams makes a positive impact on both teacher and student learning. Of course, different teams

are made up of different players, but I am more convinced than before that ultimately it is not individuals who make or break a team's performance; it's the leadership. With skillful, intentional leadership, any team can thrive.

A Skillful Approach

All leaders, regardless of the group they lead or the years of experience they have, encounter hurdles—those things that get in the way of how our teams work together and what they accomplish. “Hurdles . . . come from people we care about, [from] cultures we are proud to work within, and oftentimes from ourselves” (MacDonald, 2013, p. 11). Our approach to these hurdles influences our effectiveness as leaders. A skillful approach, which is explored extensively through reality-based dilemmas in my first book, *The Skillful Team Leader* (MacDonald, 2013), is rooted in four key tenets: values, mindset, emotional intelligence, and responsiveness (formerly called skill). Here is a brief summary of each.



When you reach a fork in the road, when you need to make an unpopular decision or notice your team has lost their way from what's important, your values become your compass. Skillful team leaders (STLs) are guided by their values and principles about such things as equity, inclusion, diversity, social justice, leadership, and teaching and learning. They also draw from personal values that define their character such as hard work, perseverance, honesty, transparency, and humility. They align teamwork to research-based, widely accepted guiding principles about teaching and learning evident in initiatives such as culturally responsive teaching, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), and so on. Values referenced throughout this book include agency, alignment, asset-based collaboration, clarity, community, competency, critical thinking, cross-collaboration, diversity, efficiency, equity, evidence-based learning, focus, harmony, inclusion, investment, learning outcomes, momentum, morale, ownership, productivity, purpose-driven talk, respect, self-awareness, and student understanding.



If you are an effective teacher, then you know children's learning is not fixed. It can be cultivated with effort, deliberate practice, and perseverance. STLs extend this growth mindset to adult learners as well as students. Just as you wouldn't give up on a child learner simply because the child was showing resistance, neither should you write off an adult learner who shows resistance.

STLs hold a growth mindset about themselves, too. They expect to make missteps as leaders. I've been doing this for a long time, and I still make facilitation moves that are the wrong call. STLs give themselves permission to stumble and learn.

A close cousin to mindset is efficacy. In the context of teams, it is the idea that educators' beliefs influence outcomes for students and families. STLs who believe that they and their teams can achieve high expectations for all students are more likely to do so than those who don't believe they can.



Emotional Intelligence

A skillful approach to team leadership is more than facilitating meetings; it's about leading people through continuous improvement—in other words, leading people through change. Different people have different emotional responses to change. In accordance with Daniel Goleman's (2004) seminal work on emotional intelligence, STLs demonstrate the following:

- *Awareness of others.* STLs can “read the room.” They recognize when their colleagues exhibit emotions that indicate distress, anxiety, insecurity, sadness, boredom, and other feelings.
- *Sensitivity to the emotions of others.* STLs respond to their colleagues in ways that foster cross-cultural sensitivity and empathy. They have a keen ability to bring levity to stressful circumstances, when appropriate, while simultaneously being supportive of their colleagues.
- *Self-awareness.* Leaders feel the same range of emotions as the people they lead. STLs notice their own feelings and their effect on others.
- *Self-regulation.* STLs don't underestimate the influence of their own emotions and moods on a group. They redirect their impulses and think before acting.



Responsiveness

Your values, mindset, and emotional intelligence shape your approach to leadership, but what people most notice are the ways in which you respond to challenges. STLs notice when hurdles arise and seek to understand why they are happening. They recognize that their own cultural positioning, or the cultural lens from which they see the world, and implicit biases shape their interpretation of events. They actively interrupt their own assumptions to skillfully respond to hurdles.

Self-assess your approach to team leadership with the STL Self-Assessment Tool provided in Primary Intention 10 (see Figure 31).

An Intentional Approach

The idea of leading teams with intention surfaced for me in an unexpected moment. Standing in a long line at the airport security headed to Alabama to work with a few districts, I realized something. That morning, I intentionally chose slip-on shoes so no one would be waiting for me to untie my sneakers. I decided to forgo any metal bangles even though they really made my outfit. I put all my toiletries in a clear bag, and made sure the bag wasn't buried at the bottom of my suitcase so that my unmentionables wouldn't fly out when I went to put it on the conveyor belt, and I chose not to buy my water until I got to the other side. I breezed through the line without a glitch, and I wondered: *What if we led collaborative learning with the same or greater level of intentionality that we put into preparing to move through airport security? STLs do.*

Walk into any team meeting and ask an STL why the seats are set up in the way that they are, why this topic is on the agenda and not that, which pieces of student work a team is analyzing and why, what teachers are looking for when they are observing a colleague teach, and so on. They don't just throw an agenda together and show up to meetings; they make deliberate choices. They think and act with purpose and commitment, always moving the work of teams toward desirable learning outcomes. STLs have a reason behind each thing they do, and it's what makes them effective.

Here are a few examples of how you might act with intention as a team leader:

- “Over the course of two weeks, I intend to set expectations for collaborative inquiry so that people understand the work we are about to do and how it differs from our other meetings.”
- “For this upcoming data analysis meeting, I intend to deepen our understanding of the student-learning problem by having us do the question that students got wrong on the assessment.”
- “In this difficult conversation, I intend to learn what my colleague's concerns are and convey that they are a valuable member of the team so that going forward they positively contribute to our meetings. I'll do it in a 1:1 check-in rather than in front of the team.”
- “In this very moment of our team meeting, I am noticing that we are blaming students. I intend to shift our team talk to take personal responsibility. I want us to feel empowered so that we can positively impact outcomes for our kids.”

This book aims to make transparent the intentional moves that STLs make.

10 STL Primary Intentions

Our intentions drive what we do. Like teachers, STLs make hundreds of deliberate moves to facilitate learning. And like teachers, STLs decide which moves to make based on what they intend to accomplish. I call these the 10 STL Primary Intentions and organize this book accordingly. Interestingly, although teachers and STLs might implement the moves differently depending on the age of the learner (child or adult), the intentions behind what they do are most often the same.

Primary Intention 1. Optimize Learning Conditions: Time, Space, and Accommodations

Primary Intention 2. Establish Expectations and Responsibilities: Norms and Roles

Primary Intention 3. Nurture Group Culture: Community and Trust

Primary Intention 4. Design and Plan Learning: Work Plans, Agendas, and Protocols

Primary Intention 5. Engage and Interact: Participation and Conflict Resolution

Primary Intention 6. Lead With Purpose and Direction: Priorities, Inquiry Questions, and Goals

Primary Intention 7. Promote Intentional Data Use: Assessment and Data Analysis

Primary Intention 8. Engage in Analytical Thinking, Creative Problem Solving, and Clear Decision Making: Unbiased Reasoning and Diverse Perspectives

Primary Intention 9. Implement New Learning: Change, Peer Observation, and Accountability

Primary Intention 10. Assess: Feedback, Reflection, and Growth for Teams and Leaders

The Paradox of Intention

The sword of intentionality can be double-edged. Setting intention brings purpose and focus to what leaders do, but it can also cause tunnel vision in which leaders miss opportunities for learning that emerges from the group, or generate a rigidity that makes it difficult to adapt when the unpredictable happens. And herein lies the paradox: As a team leader, how do you set intentions while also being open and flexible to that which you didn't intend?

To understand how STLs manage the paradox, it is helpful to return to what effective teachers do in the classroom. As an effective teacher, you set clear

objectives, but are also open to teachable moments, unplanned learning opportunities, and curveballs. Like ballroom dancers, soccer players, stage actors, and surgeons, you are agile. Fully present and mindful, you swiftly and intentionally respond to whatever comes your way without losing sight of your primary intentions.

STLs keep primary intentions front and center at all times, but are fully aware that teams are dynamic. Ideas evolve. People change. Circumstances get uprooted, and plans don't always go as planned. Never was this truer than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teams and their leaders adapted quickly, learning how to collaborate virtually. Teachers and administrators had to move swiftly to learn new methods for delivering instruction and even learn how to give students the most basic necessities, such as meals. Although I hope we don't ever have to adjust to such a crisis again, as STLs we always have to nimbly adapt, think on our feet, and make in-the-moment moves while simultaneously not losing sight of our primary intentions.

Who Are STLs?

Throughout this book, I abbreviate skillful team leaders who act with intention as STLs. This term refers to anyone who is leading a team, whether they formally hold the role of leader or not. People who will find the material in this book most useful include:

- A teacher leading colleagues.
- An instructional coach/partner leading teachers.
- A principal or assistant principal leading a school leadership or teacher team.
- A district leader leading principals.
- Any person on any team with or without the official title of “team leader.” Even a parent leading a parent–teacher organization will likely benefit from the team leadership moves highlighted in this book.

Meet the STLs Highlighted in This Book

I base the examples in this book on a composite of my own experiences and the hundreds of team leaders I have supported; however, I also highlight four standout STLs in particular (see their bios in the following section). All are seasoned educators with varying levels of experience leading different types of teams, illustrating the fact that regardless of where you are in your leadership journey, regardless of who you lead, you can be a skillful intentional team leader.

They and their teams have been so gracious in opening up their meetings to me so that I could observe and write about them. It is worth noting that in many

of their team meetings, I not only saw these leaders make moves highlighted in this book, but I also saw other team members do so. This reinforces the point that you don't need to be a formally appointed team leader to move your team toward high function and impact.



Osamagbe Osagie (she, her, hers)

Hailing from a small suburb right outside of Atlanta, Georgia, Osamagbe (Osa) is a lifelong learner who is deeply committed to amplifying the lived experiences of marginalized peoples within her local and global community. Currently, Osamagbe serves as the director of equity and inclusion at the Carroll School, a first- through ninth-grade school for children who have language-based learning differences such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. She leads her colleagues in strategic planning efforts, supporting curriculum design, facilitating group workshops, and engaging in coaching sessions. Osa's love for young people, education, and social justice stems from her work with students, her involvement in state-level politics, and her connections to local grassroots organizations. Osa met Elisa as her son's history teacher and has since been a close thought partner in the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion and team leadership. She loves to spend her free time reading books, learning more about photography, traveling, and spending quality time with her loved ones over good food, spirits, and music.



Daryl Campbell (he, him, his)

Informed by his experience as a Black male growing up in the South and guided by the belief that a quality education is a human right, Daryl has been an educator for over two decades as a classroom math and science teacher, instructional coach, district administrator, and consultant. In 2004, Daryl was the district teacher leader for the Public Schools of Brookline (MA) Educational Equity Project. Daryl worked on Elisa's team at Teach Plus, supporting teacher leaders and coaches in Turnaround schools in Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, and became director of training and development. He moved back to Georgia to be executive director of curriculum and instruction for the City Schools of Decatur. Realizing that his greatest joy is leading from the classroom, Daryl currently serves as the founding lead teacher/instructional coach for Capital Village Public Charter School in Washington, DC. Capital Village PCS opened in 2020 and serves 6% English learners, 42.8% students receiving special education services, and 83.3% economically disadvantaged students. Daryl enjoys reading, hiking, and spending quality time with family and friends.



Karen Coyle Aylward (she, her, hers)

Karen has been a National Board Certified teacher for 16 years and was named a Boston Educator of the Year in 2009. She is a veteran teacher and instructional coach at Brighton High School (MA), a comprehensive urban Turnaround high school with 45.5% English learners, 31.8% students receiving special education services, and 77.1% economically disadvantaged students. She was in the first group of appointed department teacher leaders when Elisa started a teacher leadership program at Brighton High. After 13 years in the classroom teaching English language arts to students from ninth-grade composition through Advanced Placement literature, she transitioned to the role of instructional coach for the past 9 years, helping to lead the work of instructional improvement for the school through mentoring, coaching teachers, and leading professional development. When she is not working to improve educational opportunities at Brighton High, she can be found at home chasing her three young children around.



Michelle Fox (she, her, hers)

Named the Science Educator of the Year for Middlesex County by the Massachusetts Association of Science Teachers (MAST) in 2018, Michelle has been teaching for more than two decades. She is currently an eighth-grade science teacher in a public middle school in the greater Boston metro area with 3.7% English learners and 20% students receiving special education services, in a district with 12.5% economically disadvantaged students. Michelle took part in Elisa's STL course and coaching and has been her school's science department teacher leader for the past three years. Prior to this role, she worked behind the scenes with a small team to rewrite and align the eighth-grade science curriculum to the new science standards and coached a math team. Beyond leading her colleagues, she leads students as the faculty advisor for the student PRIDE club. She lives with her husband, two children, and pet corn snake and loves taking the family out for long, rambling nature walks in their nearby woods. (They leave the snake at home.)

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into three parts.

Part I: Foundations

Chapter 1: Skillful Intentional Leadership

This first chapter that you are reading now provides a brief overview of a skillful approach to team leadership and introduces the premise of this book: STLs are

doing more than running meetings; they are leading collaborative learning for continuous improvement. Similar to effective teachers in the classroom, they decide what they are aiming to achieve and make small intentional moves to get there.

Chapter 2: Don't Settle for High-Functioning Teams

This chapter emphasizes the critical importance of leading teams from two lenses: *function* (how your team gets along and works together) and *impact* (the learning outcomes, particularly for students, that your team achieves).

I provide an overview of the Team Function, Impact Matrix in Figure 1 (first introduced in my original book, *The Skillful Team Leader* [MacDonald, 2013]), and I define four types of teams:

- Q1. High Functioning, High Impact
- Q2. High Functioning, Low Impact
- Q3. Low Functioning, Low Impact
- Q4. Low Functioning, High Impact

Chapter 3: The Real Work of Teams: Collaborative Inquiry

In this chapter, I present my STL Phases of Collaborative Inquiry as a frame for your work with teams, but acknowledge that there are many effective cycles to choose from. The model a team chooses is less important than the leadership of it. I encourage you to choose whatever cycle works for you, whether it be mine or someone else's, so long as you lead each phase with intention, skill, and agility. I also invite you to put the technical process of inquiry aside and reconnect to creating a culture of collaborative inquiry.

Part II: Essential Understandings

This section of the book presents essential understandings about leading teams of adult learners. Having a solid understanding of groups, adult learners, and peer leadership gives you the foundation to effectively implement the moves described in this book. Part II consists of three chapters:

Chapter 4: The Psychology of Groups

Chapter 5: Five Must-Knows About Adult Learners

Chapter 6: The Upside (and Downside) of Being a Peer Leader

Part III: 10 STL Primary Intentions With Moves

I organized my first book, *The Skillful Team Leader* (MacDonald, 2013), around common hurdles team leaders face. “Got a dilemma? Here’s what’s going on. Try this response.” This book comes at the work from a different angle: “Think about what you are trying to accomplish. Try these moves to get there.” In Part III I provide close to 150 moves organized into the 10 STL Primary Intentions.

Primary Intentions 1–5 address collaborative conditions, expectations, culture, planning, and engagement. These moves build what are commonly known as “soft skills.”

Primary Intentions 6–10 build what might be called the “harder” skills. They address goal setting, assessment, data analysis, evidence-based decision making, bias and assumptions, resistance to change, and accountability.

Each primary intention chapter begins with the following:

- An introduction to the primary intention.
- A list of more narrowly defined micro-intentions (what you are aiming to do in a specific moment) with several moves to choose from.
- A list of benefits to using the moves.
- A recommendation for when you might implement the moves.

Where it helps with understanding, each move explored within a primary intention contains the following components:

- Name of the move.
- A brief introduction to the move and why it is needed.
- How to implement the move.
- *In action*. A scripted excerpt from a real or fictional team dialogue.* In some sections, where the moves are intended to build upon one another (e.g., Moves 4.5 and 4.6), the example is provided at the end of the series of moves.

*I highlight four outstanding real STLs in this book (see their bios earlier in this chapter). The dialogue from these individuals and their teams is modified but authentic. Permissions were obtained to print and edit. All other scripted examples in the book describe a fictional team leader in a typical scenario intended to illustrate a clear example of each move in action. Although these “in action” examples are not literal dialogue from meetings, they are all based on a composites of real team observations and experiences.

- *STL recommendations.* Tips for how to facilitate the move skillfully.
- *Think like a teacher.*** Connections between using the given move with adult learners and students in the classroom.
- *Find the right words.* Sample language for implementing the move.
- *Related readings.* References to complementary moves in the book.

Where to Begin?

This is a long book. Approach it as you would any field book or practitioner's guide. Rely heavily on the Table of Contents to find what you need when you need it. First, read the front matter in Parts I and II so that you are better equipped to implement the moves in Part III. When you are ready, decide what your primary intention is and turn to the cover page to zero in on which moves might be appropriate to use in your situation.

For example, I am in the *Research & Study* STL phase of collaborative inquiry, and I'm planning to have my team read an article about what we are about to implement. I flip to Primary Intention 4 and look through the suggested moves under "Learn from a text-based discussion." I already know how to select a shared text (Move 4.8), and our team is already in the habit of reading together (Move 4.11), but the last time we had a text-based discussion, people didn't take very much away from it. So, I will try "Design the reading/viewing experience" (Move 4.9) and "Prep the text, the reader, and yourself" (Move 4.10). I will also glance at the moves in the preceding section, "Structure tasks and talk," in case there's a better way for me to facilitate our text-based discussion.

Thanks to Those Who've Written Before Me and to You for What You Bring to This Text

Many texts in the fields of education and organizational psychology influenced the writing of this book, but none influenced the structure more than Jennifer Serravallo's books, *The Reading Strategies Book* (2015) and *The Writing Strategies Book* (2017). In using her texts, I became conscious of the literacy goals we set for our students and the intention with which we reach them. I saw a connection to leading teams. STLs are doing more than running meetings; they are leading collaborative learning for continuous improvement. Similar to effective teachers in the classroom, they decide what they are aiming to achieve and make small intentional moves to get there. I can tell in an instant when I sit to

**In a study analyzing classroom discourse dating as far back as the mid-1960s (Bellack et al., 1966), the term *moves* was used to identify effective actions that teachers used when interacting with students. I encourage anyone who has taught students, who is now leading their peers, to draw from their repertoire of effective teacher moves. How you implement a move with adult learners might slightly differ from how you would do so with student learners, but your learning intention behind the move is often the same.

debrief a team meeting with an STL that it's no accident this person is effective. I realized from reading Serravallo's books and from my work with leaders of all types of teams that not everyone is aware of, or knows how to implement, these moves. And why would they be? Many teacher leaders and coaches are skillful at leading *student* learning, but may not have as much knowledge or experience—yet—in leading teams of adult learners. And even team leaders who have been facilitating collaborative learning for years aren't always conscious of what they did in a meeting that made it a “good” one or not. I hope this book changes that. With humility, I hope it can become *the* or at least *one* of your team leadership strategies books.

An important point worth repeating: Two team leaders can implement the same moves in this book and end up with very different outcomes. I encourage you to implement them skillfully and intentionally, considering modifications you might need to make based on the context of your circumstances, the school culture within which you work, and the uniqueness of who you are. I invite you to join me in learning and discussing with others the intentional moves STLs make, while you also discover learning that I did not even intend.

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