

For Effective Leadership, New Job Descriptions

By Bambi Betts

Just a few weeks ago at a high profile international school, a group of middle school heads of grade and department leaders gathered for some professional development. They were asked one question: What decisions is your team empowered and required to make? The answers, or lack thereof, were telling: no one really knew. If you work in a school, you have been there.

An idea about learning bubbles up. It is on the agenda at meetings, at every level. Teachers discuss it; department and grade level leaders discuss it; principals discuss it; and everyone reads about it. Input pours in: opinions, reactions, embellishments. Our investigation confirms it is a valuable practice, adding value to learning.

And a year goes by... What happened to that good idea we invested so much time in?

Right into the “black hole,” the resting place of dozens of valid and vetted ideas that never made it to the decision table. Those which were relegated to the “Did we ever decide what to do about that?” file.

So whose job was it to actually decide that the idea should be implemented, and to lay out the immediate first steps? Mine? Yours? The department as a team? Despite careful attention to ensuring that all leaders and teams have job descriptions, the key issue—where decisions actually get made—is grossly underrepresented in these briefs.

While humility, inertia, “overload,” and “sharing the decision” are often blamed, many an important learning decision that might truly benefit learners has been sacrificed to this “decision black hole”—no one seems clear on exactly who is charged with making the decision.

So no one does and, as the song goes, “another one bites the dust.” That dust has plenty of company in our schools. How about this: redesign job descriptions and “briefs” for both individuals and teams throughout the school, to include a clear list of the decisions that the job-holder or team is required to make. Instead of the status quo (typically a list of functions and desired characteristics), school leaders and teams across the school have a “buck stops here” mandate: they would actually know what decisions they are not only empowered to make, but *required* to make in that role—and so would the rest of the school.

While school heads and principals may be clear on their mandated decisions (although this is definitely questionable), clarity is woefully lacking for departments and their heads, grade level teams and their heads, curriculum coordinators (especially the latter in international schools), instructional coaches, heads of year, etc.

So move over, job descriptions. Your days are numbered, and so are your bullet points, to make room for the “new”—decisions with clear homes.