

Introduction to Literacy Leadership Teams (LLTs) Session 1

July 1, 2019

Bringing Intentionality to Instructional Leadership Teams

[Jason Stricker](#)

How to structure school leadership teams to be more focused, disciplined and accountable.

Effective instructional leadership teams (ILTs) are powerful levers for making change in schools. These teams typically include the principal, assistant principal, instructional coaches, teacher leaders and other school leaders and can provide a systematic way for schools to execute their most important priorities. However, their effectiveness is not a given. Over the nearly two decades that I've been supporting ILTs, I've seen that despite educators' best efforts, many initiatives in schools fail due to poor execution. Unfortunately, good intentions are not good enough when it comes to driving and sustaining growth.

Effective ILTs are intentional in many ways, including how and why they are organized, facilitated and supported. When these components are purposely woven together, the complex fabric of an effective meeting and team is truly present. Let's unpack each of them briefly.

Component 1: Intentionally Organized

Determining who serves on the ILT, when and where they will meet and for how long, and the goals and objectives of the meetings are all part of the intentional organization of an ILT. These actions are just good practice. But that doesn't mean they are easy to implement.

First, it's important to note that the team composition can be dynamic. There's no requirement that says once on the team, always on the team. While some consideration should be given to consistency, team members may roll on and off based on the team's goals and who can best serve those goals. Team size can vary depending on school size, but we typically see between five and ten members on an ILT. Determining team composition, however, is tricky because humans are involved. Consider bringing in a mix of visionaries, those who generally take a long-term view and naturally think about sustainability, and integrators, those who are great at getting things done by tackling issues daily, keeping people disciplined and focused and translating big ideas into action.

There will inevitably be people in the building who will ask, "Why wasn't I selected to serve on the ILT?" Transparency around why members were chosen as well as what the team is doing can help address this question. Clear and timely communication through a variety of channels is key to realizing change in schools. Besides sharing updates in staff meetings and weekly emails, make connections to your work during hallway conversations and in PLC meetings and coaching sessions.

As for the gatherings, the nature of good meeting agendas and structures can be a bit deceptive. Many ILT meetings become mired in a "rabbit hole" of problems. Without a clear structure to keep the team focused, these meetings can quickly devolve into hour-long "problem-naming" sessions without a clear process for prioritizing the most important problems to discuss. One middle school in Indiana that I had the opportunity to support was struggling with these very issues, and the ILT felt like their meetings were unproductive. After careful consideration, they adopted the 5-Star Meeting protocol, a framework developed by the Insight Education Group, my organization, that emphasizes personal and professional connections, individual contributions, lively team discussions focused on the most important issues and an honest evaluation at the end of the meeting that allows the team to identify specific ways to improve collaboration from one meeting to the

next. The 5-Star Meeting protocol provided decision-making structures that resulted in clear next steps and owners. This ultimately increased productivity and brought a disciplined cadence to the team's meetings.

When the team was first introduced to this intentional meeting structure, they thought it would be relatively easy to use. However, they not only needed to learn the mechanics of the agenda, they also needed to learn how to effectively interact with one another. This is where intentional facilitation is critical.

Component 2: Intentionally Facilitated

Effective ILTs require strong yet agile facilitation. Certainly, a well-organized agenda and meeting protocol can help with strong facilitation, but there has to be room for flexibility. ILTs often deal with complex, adaptive challenges such as how to more effectively support a teacher or group of teachers, how to create a stronger culture of learning in a school or how to more effectively engage parents as partners in the learning process. These adaptive challenges often require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships and approaches to the work. Solutions to such challenges often require experiments and new discoveries. A skilled facilitator must find ways to keep the team motivated when an attempted solution yields poor results and redirect them to find another possible solution without losing momentum. Therefore, it is critical to create a safe space in which team members feel empowered to learn and grow together by engaging in conversations, innovating in their work, and experimenting with new approaches.

While there is no one "right" way to facilitate an ILT meeting, here are a few common practices that I've used and that I've seen ILT facilitators use to ensure effective meetings.

Start and end on time. Being disciplined about starting and ending on time not only shows respect to those who always arrive on time, but also contributes to the culture of efficiency that's important for meetings.

Use personal/professional check-ins. Never skip these! This brief exercise deepens the human connection and enhances the team's ability to trust, support and collaborate with one another. The check-in is quite simple: The facilitator asks each team member to share a personal or professional "best" from the previous week (or a brief challenge). Every team member participates to set the tone that all voices are important. Good books, new movies, binge-watch worthy shows, proud parenting moments and coaching breakthroughs are often shared during the check-in.

Push thinking through questioning. Nobody likes a know-it-all. Use questioning to seek diversity of thought and draw people out. Smart questions are often harder to pose, but more productive, than just telling the team your own thoughts or answers. After all, if you already have the answers, why meet as a team? Some of the best questions are the simplest: What is the potential upside and downside of a proposed solution? What challenges can we anticipate and how can we mitigate these challenges? Questions like these encourage the team to "push on" or pressure-test possible solutions.

Confront issues and address challenges. Meetings should be about solving problems, which first requires naming a problem. This alone can be unpopular because "problem namers" can sometimes be perceived as negative, thus causing others to disengage in a meeting when negativity is introduced. Creating an ILT culture that views problem naming as essential to its work is critical. When naming a problem, try phrasing it in the form of a question that, if the team answers, will result in positive movement toward solving the problem. For example, rather than just saying, "Our Algebra I scores are terrible," ask, "What can we do to improve Algebra I scores for our cohort of 9th grade students?" Framing the problem as a question inherently makes the issue more positive, solvable, and specific—three key criteria to use when confronting issues and addressing challenges.

Engage all members. As with pushing thinking through questioning, it is important to engage all members of the ILT to encourage diversity of thought, which will lead to a more robust conversation and ultimately a better solution. Engaging all members doesn't just happen when the ILT meets; it should also happen before the ILT is formed (when thinking about who will provide a diverse, productive perspective) and in between meetings (by being thoughtful about each person's role in next steps and "to do's").

Give context and examples when offering suggestions or raising an issue. ILT members gain confidence in a possible solution by trying or modeling it in multiple contexts. For example, imagine the ILT is struggling with the utilization of academic vocabulary across multiple content areas and classrooms. Rather than simply identifying a strategy for teaching academic vocabulary and requesting that all teachers use it, the ILT can view the challenge through the lens of multiple contexts. What would the strategy look like if used in multiple grade levels and content areas? By testing a strategy in different settings, possible flaws will be elevated for the team to address. This level of analysis often results in more robust, sustainable solutions.

Use graciousness, humor and purpose. These three attitudes speak to the human nature of our work. The field of education requires close attention to the feelings, hopes, struggles and dreams of individuals. In an ILT setting, we must remember that each educator on the team needs to get something out of the meeting and not just contribute. Whether it be a simple thank you from respected peers on the ILT, a laugh or two with colleagues during the meeting or having the opportunity to voice their purpose or "why" for being an educator, such actions can contribute to the personal and professional satisfaction of ILT members.

Component 3: Intentionally Supported

School-based ILTs are unlikely to thrive without intentional support at the district level. That support should start with modeling. One of the best ways for district leaders to do this is to replicate the structures and components of effective ILTs in their own meetings. Central office teams that employ the same level of intentionality with the organization and facilitation of their meetings will be much better positioned to support the work of ILTs in the field. Central office teams will not only gain credibility at the site level by "practicing what they preach," but they will also unearth the real challenges associated with leading effective team meetings. As central office teams problem-solve these challenges, they can share lessons learned with the ILTs they support.

A recent experience I had working with a large district in the Southeast taught me the value of such intentional modeling and support. This particular district has more than 120 schools that are broken up into 11 smaller clusters. Each cluster is supervised by an executive director (ED) in the central office. The EDs had identified a common challenge of improving the level of instructional and distributed leadership at their school sites and decided that improving the ILT structure would be a good way to address this challenge. However, it was clear that there were very different opinions about what an effective ILT looked and sounded like. With a bit of discussion, the ED team agreed to use a common meeting structure (the 5-Star Meeting protocol). They then applied the components of intentional organization and facilitation to their ED meetings, and a few key learnings emerged.

First was the importance of alignment. The EDs realized that they needed to be more intentional about aligning their work to the annual goals and metrics of the district's strategic plan. They had been working hard to solve problems that emerged in their schools on a daily basis, but this "firefighting" mentality in many cases distracted them from focusing on the bigger picture.

They also learned that schools or districts must define what good instruction looks like, and ILTs must constantly refer back to this definition as their guidepost. What is the school's or district's theory of action about great

instruction? What inputs will produce the types of learning and achievement desired? While such questions may seem basic, ineffective meetings can result from the lack of a clear definition of what great teaching looks like (e.g., instructional frameworks or "look-fors") or, if a good definition exists, a lack of focus on it. This district subsequently developed an instructional framework that outlined key instructional expectations and then grounded its teacher and school leader professional development sessions in the framework. This helped create a foundation for ILTs.

Defining good instruction is critical because it serves as the rudder for the school-based ILT. Without this rudder, the team will lack focus and experience meeting fatigue, since there will be no clear goal on which the team can focus. The team may choose to address poor literacy achievement based on the latest benchmark data, but without a clear understanding of how to position that problem in the context of a clear goal, such as 90 percent of students reading on grade level, the team will not be able to effectively set milestones.

Additionally, without a clear understanding of what good reading instruction looks like, the team will struggle to find possible strategies to address the problem. Therefore, it is critical to have clear outcome-based and input-based goals. The outcome-based goal, in this example, would be the level of reading proficiency to be achieved. The input-based goal would focus on a strategy or strategies that could be tested as a possible solution.

Bringing It All Together

It's important not to forget that these three components must be viewed and implemented collectively rather than in isolation. When they are at work simultaneously, several positive things happen. First, meetings become much more focused. With a clear structure for identifying and discussing next steps and for solving issues, ILTs truly become the lever for making change happen. Second, the ILT meeting structure provides discipline to get the work done. There's a set time and place to meet, members know their roles and there's a clear set of incremental goals to achieve. Third, these three components together provide a framework for accountability. With team members authentically engaged and invested in the process of change, they gain a clearer sense about their individual responsibilities to the work as a whole.

It's been exciting to watch how instructional leadership teams with these components in place can help schools gain incredible traction on their biggest challenges—and experience the wins they've been seeking.

Source: <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/bringing-intentionality-to-instructional-leadership-teams>

Mission Statement & Goal Development Resources

Mission Statement Checklist

(Adapted from Gabriel & Farmer, 2009 and Shearer, Carr, & Vogt, 2019)

Criteria	
<i>Is the mission statement . . . ?</i>	Yes or No
Data driven	
Aligned with the Comprehensive Evidence-Based Reading Plan from the district and the school	
Informed by scholarly resources	
Focused upon student achievement as described in the School Improvement Plan (SIP)	
Related to potential goals for the entire school, classrooms, and students' homes	
Easily understandable	
Sufficiently specific or overly opaque	
Explaining a path forward for the school	
Future-oriented and inspirational	
Unattainable or attainable	

Mission Statement Development Resources

Revising an Existing Mission Statement

Guiding Questions

Answer the following questions regarding the revision of your existing mission statement.

When did the team last revisit the mission?

How often does the team revise the mission?

How does the mission incorporate the B.E.S.T. Standards?

Goal/Action Step Development Resources

SMART Framework for Goal Development

(Gabriel & Farmer, 2009)

	Traditional Goal	Progressive Goal
	<i>Student achievement will improve.</i>	<i>The percentage of Multilingual Learners (MLs) scoring an Overall Proficiency level of 4 will increase from 79 to 85 percent by February 2021 as measured by the ACCESS for English Language Learners (ELLs)* assessment.</i> *For more information about the ACCESS for ELLs proficiency levels, please visit https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/Interpretive-Guide.pdf .
Specific	This goal needs more specificity. Which students from our population will improve? What aspect of their achievement do we want to see improved? Marking period grades? Final course grades? Standardized test scores? The desired outcome is unclear.	This goal identifies a subgroup, a subject and a target population and clearly defines the desired outcome. We could even break this down further by identifying a tested proficiency level like Listening, Speaking, etc.
Measurable	"Improve" is difficult to quantify. What does it really mean? By how much do we want achievement to improve?	This goal is measurable. It clearly identifies the starting point as 79 percent and the minimal acceptable value as 85 percent.
Achievable	This goal <i>seems</i> achievable. But we do not really know because the goal does not define what it means by "improve."	You can gauge whether a goal is achievable by asking yourself if the goal is pushing you beyond your limits, or if it is something you can accomplish if you stretch yourself. A goal of improving to a 100 percent passing rate in one year, for instance, would not be reasonable; however, a six percent increase is reasonable.
Relevant	Is this goal relevant to the school's vision and mission? We can't tell because the goal is not clear on how it relates to them.	This goal is relevant because it has identified a specific area of need. It directly addresses an assessment administered to a subgroup within a school and the language proficiency level of the subgroup.
Time Frame	What is the timeframe for reaching this goal? We have no idea whether it's a short-term or a long-range goal.	The end date for this goal is the 2021 testing window.

Goal/Action Step Development Resources

Smart Goal Template

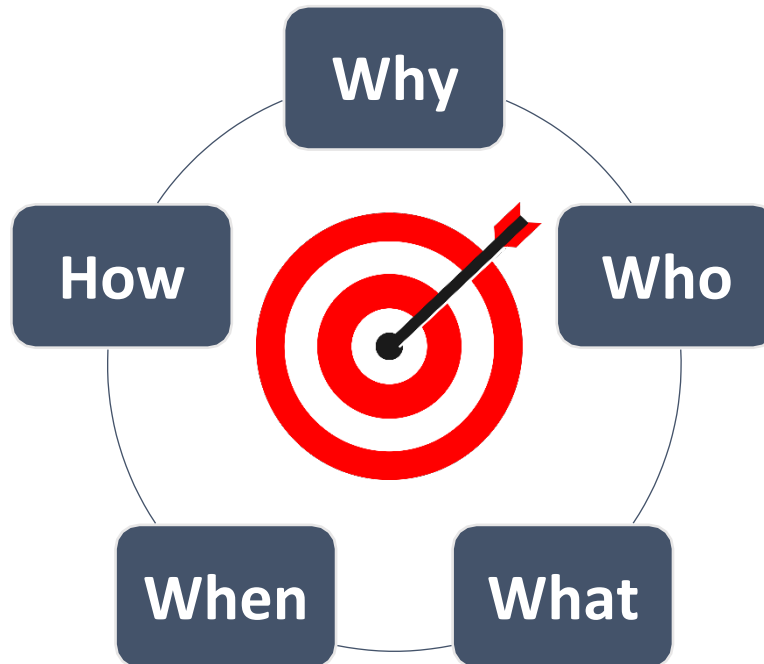


The percentage of **(content subject)** students scoring proficient or higher in **(content focus)** will increase from **(baseline % data)** to **(target % proficiency)** by the end of **(Month and Year)** as measured by **(summative assessment tool)**.

Goal/Action Step Development Resources

Guiding Questions for Goal Development

(Gabriel & Farmer, 2009)



As goals are developed, the following guiding questions may be contemplated:

- **Why** does it need to be done?
- **Who** will be affected, who is responsible and who will participate? Who is the audience, and who are the stakeholders?
- **What** needs to be done? The “what” should be in direct relation to the purpose.
- **When** will this take place? When will we know we are done? When can our progress be measured?
- **How** will it be measured? How will you know it was successful?

Reading Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection is a significant aspect of the LLT's work. Data can paint a picture of where you are as a team and catapult the planning of where you want to go as a team. Following are suggestions for the kind of reading data you want to consider gathering if you haven't already done so.

Reading Data Collection to Consider:

- State Assessment Data
- Progress Monitoring Data
- Student Work Samples
- Student Writing Samples
- Foundational Skills Data
- Current Strengths and Weaknesses as a Team

Reading Data Analysis to Consider:

- Subgroup
- Grade Level
- Student Cohort Analysis
- Teacher Cohort Analysis
- Multi-Year Analysis
- Benchmark Analysis
- Standard Strand Analysis

Reading Data Collection and Analysis

Guiding Questions

As you analyze your reading data, here are a few sample questions to guide your team's conversation. This is not an all-inclusive list.

Analysis of Grade Level Achievement (Guiding Questions)

- What implications can be made when observing the achievement from 2016 to 2019 across each grade level? (Timeframes may be removed.)
- Is achievement increasing, decreasing or stagnant? Why?
- Are there concerning trends? Why?

Cohort Analysis (Guiding Questions)

- What implications can be made as you observe the achievement of a grade level cohort as the cohort goes from one grade level to the next?
- Are there noticeable drops or increases occurring? Why?
- What factors are contributing to decreases or increases in observed achievement from one grade level to the next?
- What overall strengths and weaknesses does the data reflect?

Subgroup Performance Analysis (Guiding Questions)

- How many students are represented in the subgroup of students who are Economically-Disadvantaged? English Language Learners? African American? Caucasian American? Hispanic? Asian? Multi-Racial? Pacific Islander? Students with Learning Disabilities?
- Are there significant gaps in achievement? If so, in what subgroups?
- What supports are in place for each subgroup with a significant gap in achievement?
- What are the most significant barriers affecting subgroups with a significant gap in achievement?
- What resources do we possess as a school or district to reduce the impact of any identified barriers?
- What current supports have been most effective? How can existing supports be replicated or refined to address barriers identified in subgroup performance data?

Stakeholders' Commitment to Literacy Learning

Stakeholder	Perceived Level of Commitment (please circle)			Evidence
-------------	--	--	--	----------

Students	Low	Medium	High	
Teachers	Low	Medium	High	
School Community	Low	Medium	High	
School Leadership Team	Low	Medium	High	
District or System Leadership	Low	Medium	High	

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/leadership-for-literacy>

Resource Commitment to Literacy

Resources	Commitment Level	
	Current Status	Level Pledged
Financial/Budget		
Personnel		
Professional Development		
Learning Tools		
Learning Space		
Learning Time		

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/leadership-for-literacy>

