

Managing to Lead: Reframing School Leadership and Management

Author(s): James P. Spillane

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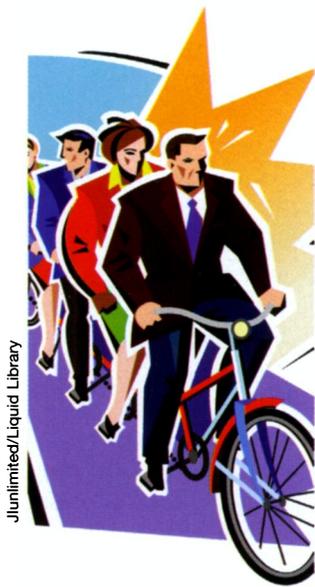
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**JAMES P. SPILLANE**

*Paying attention to management yields discoveries about the practice of school leadership.*

## Managing to Lead: Reframing School Leadership and Management

Leadership and management make a difference in increasing school productivity and turning around struggling schools. But common ways of thinking about leadership and management limit how we think about the work. Too often, we place the burden for saving a failing school on the principal, perpetuating a view of successful school leaders as heroes and less successful ones as failures. Too often, we give short shrift to the *practice* of leading and managing, focusing instead on leadership styles or personal approaches. Dwelling on the formal school organization, we overlook informal relationships that are fundamental to leadership. By fixating on leadership, we pay inadequate attention to the importance of management.

At Northwestern University, we're working to change how researchers, developers, practitioners, and policy makers think about school leadership and management. Over the last decade, as part of the Distributed Leadership Studies (DLS), we've been developing a new framework for examining school leadership and management ([www.distributedleadership.org](http://www.distributedleadership.org)). Viewed from this framework, school leadership practice is constructed through the interactions of leaders, followers, and aspects of the context. The framework draws on theoretical and empirical work from various fields, including distributed cognition and sociocultural activity theory

**JAMES P. SPILLANE** is the Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Chair in Learning and Organizational Change in the School of Education and Social Policy and the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

(Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001, 2004). Our distributed framework, like all frameworks, has limitations, as it highlights some aspects of leading and managing and backgrounds others. It does, however, offer a fresh perspective on these phenomena.

Our distributed framework involves two core aspects: principal plus and practice (Spillane 2006). The principal plus aspect acknowledges that multiple individuals are involved in leading and managing schools. The practice aspect prioritizes the *practice* of leading and managing and frames this practice as emerging from *interactions* among school leaders and followers, mediated by the situation in which the work occurs. In our view, practice is more about interaction than action. Putting practice center stage allows us to focus where the "rubber" of



school leadership and management meets the "road" of instructional improvement.

Our distributed perspective is not a blueprint for leading and managing. Rather, it's a framework for researchers and practitioners to use in diagnosing the practice of leading and managing and designing for its improvement (Spillane 2006; Spillane and Diamond 2007). We employ the distributed framework to various ends. First, we're designing and validating such research instruments as practice logs and social network instruments (Camburn, Spillane, and Sebastian, under review; Spillane and Zuberi 2009; Pitts and Spillane 2009; Pustejovsky and Spillane, in press). While these instruments are designed for gathering data, practitioners can also use them to reflect on practice. Second, based on our analysis of data from multiple sites, we're able to describe

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leadership and management arrangements in schools and explore relations between these arrangements and other crucial variables in the school context — organizational conditions, instructional innovation, and student learning. This will enable us to describe what works — and what doesn't — in school leadership and management. Third, we're building curriculum modules to engage school leaders in their own diagnostic and design work using the distributed perspective.

### **The Principal Plus: Rethinking Who Has and Who Takes Responsibility**

While allowing for the occasional hero or heroine in school leadership, our distributed frame presses us to reach beyond the principal to pay attention to other designated leaders. The work of leading and managing involves a cast of others in addition to the principal, such as assistant principals, curriculum specialists, mentor teachers, and department chairs (Spillane 2006; Spillane and Diamond 2007; Spillane, Hunt, and Healey 2009).

Even when we focus on the principal's work day, we find that others play a central role, either taking responsibility for activities themselves or co-performing the activity with the principal. In one study, principals reported that "other school staff" shared responsibility for 31% of the activities in which they participated. Designated leaders were not the only ones identified by these principals; classroom teachers with no formal leadership designation figured most prominently in these activities. As one might expect, considerable variation exists between schools and activity types (for example, administration versus curriculum and instruction) both in the prevalence and positions of these other leaders in the principal's work day. For example, some principals reported co-performing over 60% of the activities for which they took responsibility, while others reported co-performing fewer than 10% (Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja 2007; Spillane, Camburn, Pustejovsky, Pareja, and Lewis 2009). The type of task mattered: While principals reported taking responsibility for over three-quarters of all administrative activities in which they participated, they reported taking responsibility for just over half of instruction and curriculum activities.

Moving beyond a focus on the principal's work day, we gain a more comprehensive view of those who have a hand in leading and man-

aging (Spillane and Diamond 2007). For example, our analysis of survey data from teachers, specialists, and administrators in 23 elementary schools in one mid-sized urban school district found that 27% (247 of 932 respondents) reported holding a designated

### *When it comes to leading and managing instruction, the subject matters.*

leadership position (Spillane, Hunt, and Healey 2009). On average, there were 11.7 designated leaders per school (ranging from 5 to 17). Roughly two-thirds of the occupants of these positions were part-time because they were also teaching. Including the principal, the average number of full-time leaders per school was 4.6 (Spillane, Hunt, and Healey 2009).

But not all of those who had a hand in leading and managing instruction in these 23 elementary schools had a formal designation. Confining our focus to leading and managing instruction in mathematics and language arts, we examined those on the staff to whom teachers turned for advice and information with respect to teaching. Roughly half of the key advisors for language arts or mathematics had no formal leadership designation. On average, schools had 2.0 informal leaders for language arts and 1.7 for mathematics, but this ranged from 0 in one school to 10 in another. More striking is that only 43% of the language arts coordinators and 36% of the mathematics coordinators were identified by school staff as key advice givers. Examined from a different angle, formally designated leaders account for between 6% and 90% of mathematics advice relations and from 3% to 90% of language arts advice relations. Our analysis suggests considerable variation among schools in the match between the formal and informal organization (Spillane, Hunt, and Healey 2009).

Our work dispels some popular myths often spread under the rubric of distributed leadership.

First, a distributed perspective does not negate the principal's role; principals figure prominently in our empirical accounts of leading and managing schools, though their prominence differs depending on the school, school subject, and activity.

Second, while the distributed perspective allows for the possibility that anyone in the

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school may take responsibility for leading and managing, our research suggests that not everyone in the schoolhouse is involved in leading and managing — who the leaders are depends on the school, subject, and activity.

Our research suggests that to understand

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school leadership and management, we must move beyond the current fixation with the principal to consider the team of individuals who have or take responsibility for leading and managing. This involves much more than identifying team members — we need to attend to the characteristics of the team by looking at such factors as team diversity in terms of experience, career stage, gender, and race (Spillane, Hunt, and Healey 2009). Moreover, we need to look at the distributed expertise of team members (Spillane, White, and Stephan 2009). We need to pay attention to how the work of leading and managing is task- and subject-specific, and we need to attend to how responsibility is divided or duplicated among team members by activity.

**The Practice Aspect:  
Organizational Routines**

The distributed perspective frames practice as a product of the interactions among school leaders, followers, and aspects of their situation. In this view, getting to interactions is essential in the study of practice. A principal or teacher leader acts, and another staff member reacts, and these ongoing interactions shape the practice of leading and managing (Spillane 2006). When viewed through a distributed frame, aspects of the situation — such as organizational routines (for example, grade-level meetings) and tools of various sorts (for example, teacher evaluation protocols) — define the practice of leading and managing by focusing interactions among leaders and followers on particular features of curriculum and pedagogy within the school.

Often taken for granted, organizational routines — grade-level meetings, teacher evaluations, teachers’ collaborative examination of student work, lesson study, learning walks,

shared lesson planning — are an integral part of school life and figure prominently in school leaders efforts to reform instruction (Spillane 2006; Sherer and Spillane in press). Rather than simply affecting or accessorizing practice, these routines define that practice by focusing interactions among leaders and followers on some things rather than others (Spillane 2006; Coldren 2007). Considering the staff time the average school devotes each year to organizational routines, it’s important to analyze the functions these routines serve and their theories of action. Often, routines become so taken for granted in organizations that we never stop to ask what purposes they’re intended to serve and assess whether they accomplish these purposes.

Organizational routines that are roughly similar in design can have very different results in practice. One important factor here is the school subject. To begin, who takes responsibility for leading and managing differs depending on the school subject (Spillane 2005). Further, elementary school leaders’ internal “scripts” for leading and managing school subjects differ (Burch and Spillane 2004). For example, school leaders often believe they have expertise for leading improvement in language arts within the school, but they look externally for expertise for leading improvement in mathematics.

Moreover, our work suggests that the practice of leading and managing varies by subject. For example, in our studies in Chicago elementary schools, leadership activities related to language arts tended to be characterized by a lively, back-and-forth dialogue among participants regardless of position; in mathematics, designated leaders did most of the talking, with other participants typically entering the dialogue to pose clarifying questions (Sherer 2007; Lee and Spillane 2008; Spillane 2005). This is not to say that one approach is better than another — just different, at least in the Chicago schools we studied at that particular time period. When it comes to leading and managing instruction, the subject matters.

**Realizing the Potential**

Armchair theorizing about school leadership (sometimes management) is plentiful. Talk is cheap! New jargon to describe school leadership and management comes and goes at a rapid rate. The leadership and management bazaar is huge, with a dazzling array of products and services. Researchers and practition-

ers are often skeptical about some of the offerings in this grand bazaar — and they should be! The theories that scholars put forward about practice should have some firm grounding in practice. Practitioners are right to be skeptical about ideas and routines that aren't grounded in solid empirical work on *actual school leadership and management practice*. Scholars can easily concoct new ideas or change their minds about existing ones when they're not obliged to subject their ideas to empirical tests in the world of practice through both rigorous research (using various research methods) and development work with practitioners. Having ideas is one thing. Deploying them in practice through research and development is another matter. School leaders and policy makers can change this state of affairs by becoming savvy — and more discriminating — consumers of research and development work. Current and future theorizing about leadership and management would benefit greatly from an audience that demands evidence that scholarship is grounded in practice. ■

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