

Getting Ready

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“I want to have a SAM.” said Principal Stevens.

“I want my principals to have SAMs.” said Superintendent Meredith.

“I want my superintendent to have a SAM.” said Board President Garcia.

These initial statements of interest trigger the readiness work at both the board, district and school levels that is the foundation of the National SAM Project. This process of **getting ready** requires school leaders to think through why they want to engage in the SAM process and depends on a large amount of reflection.

The National SAM Project is a professional development process where principals use their own time use data to increase time spent on instructional leadership rather than managerial duties. Principals in the projects use their leadership positions to help teachers improve their practice, students to improve their performance and parents to increase their effectiveness in helping their children achieve. Using TimeTrack, a software program, participating principals work to spend the majority of their time on these tasks.

Readiness work challenges assumptions and leads the participants to a different level of engagement with their school communities. To be effective in the SAM work the administrator needs to gain permission of support staff, teachers, students and the broader community to change the role of the principal. This requires building an understanding that it makes sense for principals to make instructional leadership their priority.

The readiness work begins, simply, with a one word question: “Why?” It progresses to a self-assessment of the skills the principal has and the behaviors he/she exhibits that would help or hinder success. Is the principal’s human relations IQ high enough for this to work? Is the principal open to learn from teachers, students and parents as he/she guides improvement?

For a superintendents or Board members, the questions center on how **they** would have to change in order to support principals and school communities electing to participate.

The readiness process is not a litmus test. It is, instead, a systematic approach to create the conditions necessary before starting. Once in place, the process repeats itself to ensure that conditions continue to support the principal's active engagement in the instructional life of the school.

A gardener doesn't buy the tomato plants and place them in soil that is rocky and hard. Instead, the gardener prepares the soil, makes sure that water and fertilizer are ready, and then adds the plants. The gardener doesn't walk away and expect to return later and find tomatoes ready for picking. Instead, he/she continually checks the soil, nurtures the plants and is vigilant that conditions are optimal.

Readiness work in the SAM process is analogous. It isn't complicated but requires a willingness to do the heavy lifting, and listening, with resolute determination to build healthy, collaborative relationships with teachers, parents and students.

Principals and districts that complete this first step are then invited to bring teams comprised of teachers, parents, support staff and students to a day-long readiness workshop. Each team works with the principal to develop a "passion speech" that clearly explains why he/she wants to spend more time on instructional leadership. Akin to Tichy's Teachable Point of View, the passion speech relies on an emotional draw, or pull, tied to the experience and drive of the principal and, within two or three minutes, clearly and persuasively explains why it makes sense for the principal to make a change. Teams practice the passion speech with the principal. In doing so, each team member develops the capacity to deliver their own "passion speech" to the people in the school community they represent and build a bond, or ownership, with the principal.

The teams next complete three of the tools from Dr. Jody Spiro's Leading Change Tool Kit: The Readiness Rubric, Stakeholder Analysis and designing Short-Term Tangible Wins. The conversation and, later, action plans, that result are remarkable.

The teams are given a “twelve step” homework packet to complete. The twelve steps are a guide to ensure that the team includes all members of the school community in a meaningful manner and build a level of understanding and support so the SAM process can thrive. (National SAM Project Twelve Steps can be found at the end of this article.)

The SAM process requires the principal to change. This isn’t an easy task for anyone and is especially hard when the change desired is counter to the norm. People think they know what principals are supposed to do because they had one once. The traditional principal they likely experienced spent very little time on teaching and learning improvement efforts.

Successful SAM principals transcend the norm with the help of their teachers and school community. The Japanese word, *Wagamama*, describes a person who is all about themselves—me first—centered on only what they want with little regard for the consequences. SAM principals, by definition, are the opposite. They “get that way” through regular reflection and clear vision that increasing student achievement and teacher efficacy is their primary role and is more important than authority or position.

The length of time school communities spend on readiness activities varies greatly. The most successful schools spend more time up front building understanding and support for the changed role of the principal and keep revisiting the readiness steps as they implement the project.

National SAM Project Twelve Steps:

1. Talk with your school’s leadership team about what it would *“look like, feel like”* if you spent more time on instructional improvement and less time on management. Ask the question: *“How will you feel if I am 100% available to you for instructional issues but 0% available, initially, for management issues?”*

2. *Talk with your SAM. Is he/she willing to take on this task of coaching you each day on your use of time? He/she will meet with you each day to complete a calendar tool called TimeTrack.*
3. *Talk with your assistant principals. Are they supportive? Ask them: "Would you be willing to have your time tracked for a week for your own professional development?"*
4. *Talk with your school's teachers' union representative: Does he/she think you are good at working with teachers on instructional improvement? Is your Human Relations IQ high enough?*
5. Make list of time winners and losers in the school. Talk with staff members who will lose time with you. Can they support you? (Example: a school secretary will likely be a time loser. She will have less time with the principal than before. How will she feel? Can you explain your passion for the making the change in a way that the secretary will appreciate and accept?)
6. Meet with your secretary and other office support staff. Ask for their permission and support as you attempt to make this change in how you use time. Schedule one time each day to work on management issues with them.
7. Practice and role-play with your secretary and office support staff on how to explain to parents/students/staff when you are not available due to instructional work. Make your calendar available to them so they can schedule as needed. Communicate that you should rarely be the first step in any management issue but you will need their help in communicating the change in a way the school community can understand and appreciate.
8. Talk with parent and student group representatives about why you want to make this change. Can you explain your reasons in a persuasive way?

9. Review all the readiness tools developed by Dr. Jody Spiro. Use the tools with appropriate groups.

10. Send a letter to your staff and parents, similar to the sample below, and ask for their reaction. Are they ready for a principal who spends most of his/her time working to improve instructional practice?

Dear _____:

I've been invited to participate in a national study concerning principal use of time. As a principal I try to make instructional work my priority, but management duties sometime get in the way. A data collector will be shadowing me the week of _____. Every five minutes my "shadow" will take data on what I am doing. The data collector can't talk to me, or anyone else. The data collector will carry a red clipboard with a stop watch and will try to be as "invisible" as possible and not disrupt our work. Another data collector will conduct surveys with randomly selected seniors and parents to help determine how people in our school view the role of a principal. A survey form will be given to all teachers, too.

I will receive the results of the data collection mid-April and will begin working to increase the percentage of time I spend on instruction.

Next year we will repeat the data collection process to see how much progress I have made.

Please make every effort to interact with me as you do every other day.

Thanks for your help,

Allen Stevens

Gemini High School

11. Take a look at your calendar for yesterday. Try to enter all the things you actually did—how you spent your time. Highlight the management work that you could have delegated. Looking at the same calendar, make a list of the instructional work you would have liked to do. Are you willing to spend time each day analyzing your use of time?

12. Talk with your supervisor(s) about the change you are making. Explain that you will be on a tight calendar/schedule and your office staff will make every effort to keep you on task. How will the supervisor feel when asked if his/her call is urgent or could a call be scheduled at a time that does not conflict with instructional work?

Talk with your coach about your readiness work and determine if you are ready. If so, select a date for data collection. You are ready to begin.