PART 1: START WITH A PLAN – HOW FACULTY LEADERS CAN BUILD FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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In centralized online programs, faculty often teach courses they did not design. The shell is built, the assessments are set, and the pacing is already in place. Still, student success is closely tied to what happens once the course opens: how instructors facilitate discussion, provide feedback, and establish presence (Lucas et al., 2021). That is where faculty leaders play a critical role. When teaching faculty cannot change the course design, faculty leaders, through Learning Leadership, influence the conditions in which teaching happens by clarifying expectations, reducing challenges, and building trust and community that help faculty strengthen the areas they can control. Faculty leaders build collaborative learning communities by starting with a focused plan: one that targets a meaningful area of teaching practice, reduces friction, and matches support to faculty readiness.

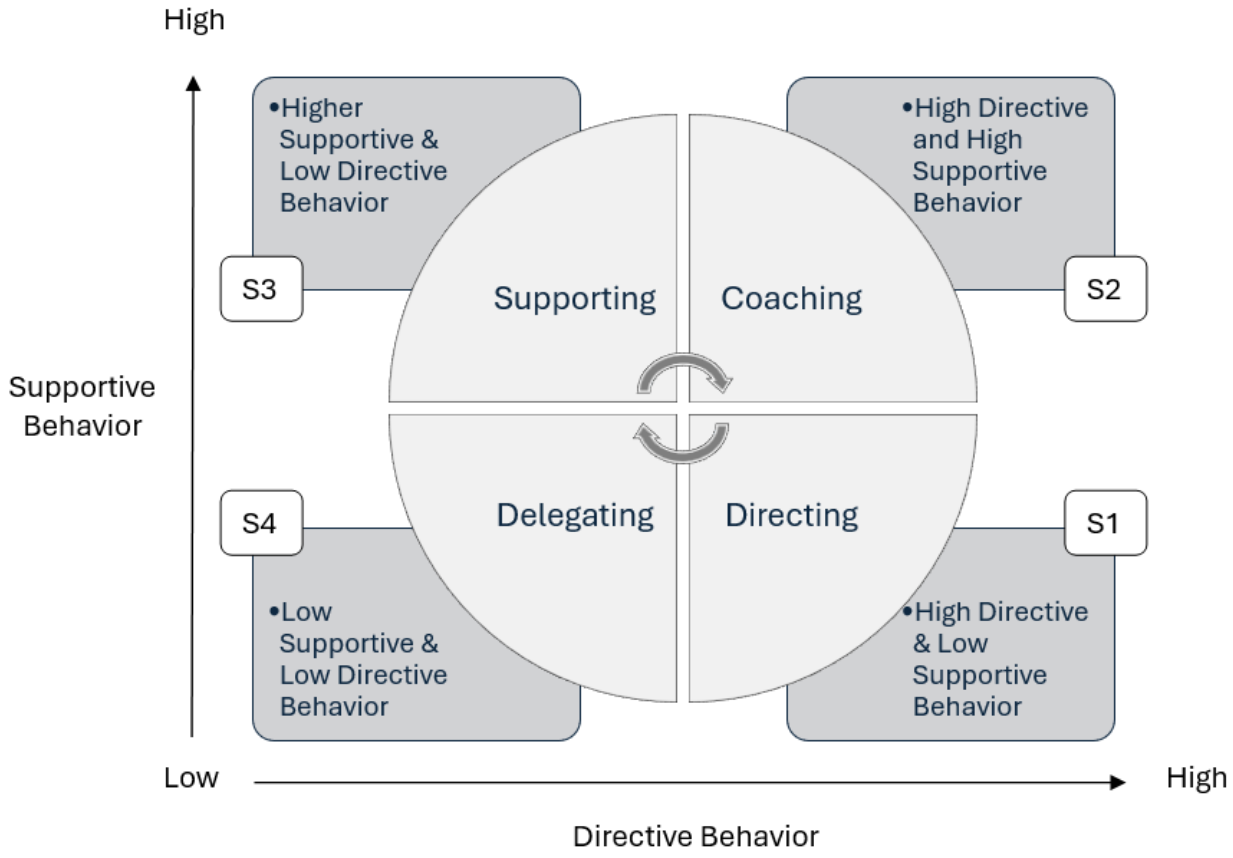
A focused plan begins with assessing the aspects of a course that teaching faculty can control directly: facilitation, feedback, and presence. These are the areas where faculty can humanize the course, deepen learning, and help students feel connected. An effective Learning Leadership plan does not try to improve all these aspects at once. Instead, faculty leaders should identify one meaningful area for growth and build support around it. Without that focus, faculty support can quickly become too broad to be useful and too vague to guide improvement. Therefore, faculty leaders need a way to decide what to prioritize first and how to support it.

When determining what area of faculty improvement to prioritize, Servant Leadership becomes useful. Greenleaf's (1970) service-first approach helps faculty leaders think about Learning Leadership not as adding more initiatives, but as identifying and removing the obstacles that make strong teaching harder to sustain. In practice, that means asking what is getting in the way of effective facilitation, feedback, or presence, and then building support around that need. A faculty leader working from this lens might make expectations more transparent, share high-quality exemplars, create reliable communication channels, clarify recurring points of confusion, or close the loop when faculty feedback leads to improvement. This matters because Learning Leadership is not only about naming improvement goals, but also about creating the conditions that make improvement more likely. They signal that faculty are supported, that their expertise matters, and that they are not working in isolation. Servant Leadership keeps the plan focused by directing attention to the support faculty need to take the next step in practice.

If Servant Leadership helps faculty leaders decide *what* to focus on, Situational Leadership helps them decide *how* to support it. Faculty leaders know that not every instructor needs the same kind of support. Situational Leadership helps leaders adjust their approach based on readiness (Hersey et al., 2013). As Figure 1 shows, the model is built on two variables: the degree of direction a leader provides and the

degree of support they offer. The right balance depends on the readiness of the person being supported. In faculty development, that means instructors who are new to a task may need more direct guidance and clear examples, while those with greater confidence and experience may benefit more from coaching, shared problem-solving, or less directive support. This matters to Learning Leadership because improving teaching practice requires more than identifying a growth area; it requires support that fits the faculty member or group doing the work. Planning an improvement or support strategy for faculty development without accounting for readiness may miss the mark. Support can feel either too heavy or too vague. A better plan matches the level of guidance to the instructor's need.

Figure 1. *Situational Leadership styles by level of directive and supportive behavior (S1–S4)*



Note. Based on Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson's (2013) Situational Leadership model.

Together, Servant and Situational Leadership help faculty leaders translate Learning Leadership into a focused, usable support plan. Servant Leadership helps leaders identify what barriers or needs deserve attention, while Situational Leadership helps them decide how much guidance and support will make improvement more likely. A useful Learning Leadership plan can begin by answering four questions:

- What challenge are we trying to solve?

- Who needs support most?
- What is the next visible move we want to see?
- What kind of support will make that move more likely?

This is where Learning Leadership moves from planning into visible instructional support. Faculty leaders use the planning process to identify a specific area of teaching practice, define the next move they want to see, and build support that helps faculty translate that guidance into practice. For example, leaders might decide to help faculty in criminal justice-related programs write discussion replies that more clearly connect course concepts to the work students hope to do in those fields. That support might include a model example with an explanation of why it works, a short one-to-one or cohort coaching conversation, or a structured opportunity to compare practice examples with peers. The answers should remain grounded in concrete, focused, and observable practice. When leaders clarify what stronger practice looks like, they can build more specific, usable, and effective support. That support might include exemplars, brief coaching, peer discussion, or structured options for how faculty meet the same expectations.

For faculty leaders, effective Learning Leadership must include a support plan that is focused enough to use. Faculty leaders do not need an elaborate initiative to begin building collaborative learning communities. They need a clear, focused, faculty-centered plan that concentrates on what faculty can control, reduces unnecessary barriers, and aligns support to readiness. The most effective plans keep the needs and development of the learning community in mind by translating that focus into a single, clear, manageable starting point.

Collaborative learning communities are built through intentional faculty leadership. For faculty leaders, this is one way Learning Leadership becomes visible in practice, through focused support that helps faculty strengthen teaching in clear, usable, and observable ways. In centralized online courses, that work begins with a focused, faculty-centered improvement plan that concentrates on what instructors can control, reduces unnecessary friction, and aligns support to readiness. Rather than asking faculty to improve everything at once, this approach creates a clear starting point and a manageable path forward. A practical place to begin is simple: choose one area, identify one next move, and build support that helps faculty take the next step in their practice.

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