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Three Keys to Building Effective Leadership Teams

When leadership teams model effective practices, great things happen for everyone in our schools—especially our students.

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None of us are as smart as all of us. – Japanese Proverb

Finding good players is easy. Getting them to play as a team is another story. – Casey Stengel

In today’s schools there are multiple agendas, a variety of audiences, and a wide range of perspectives on any given issue. And yet, more often than not, it is assumed that simply gathering interested, competent representatives with a superintendent, principal, department chair, or other anointed team leader will automatically result in an effective leadership team. In our experience, this is a dangerous misperception. As Casey Stengel said, getting the players is easy. The real task is getting those players to work together as a team.

What is collaborative leadership and how can we, as educators, equate it with effective leadership? Each of the three activities discussed in this article addresses key competencies necessary for effective leadership teams in 21st century schools:

- Without a commonly understood and accepted *vision*, there is the danger of wasted time and resources—both of which are in increasingly short supply.
- *Engagement* requires that each member of the team develop a personal connection with the vision and with one another, ensuring that everyone’s expertise is used.
- Making sure that everyone’s *voice* is heard values each member’s concerns and ideas. In today’s competitive, flat world we need everyone’s contribution. As the Japanese proverb says, each team member’s input makes us smarter.

Establishing a Common Vision

Tool: Synectics

When asking members of groups about their vision, we often find that folks are either without a clue or they have adopted a

vision statement that some other group has written, which has very little meaning for the situation at hand. Without a clearly articulated shared vision, planning becomes muddled and the group becomes frustrated about its lack of progress, or it heads off in the wrong direction. It is critical to take the time to develop a shared vision for the group in a collaborative manner.

Inviting members of a collaborative group to explore and reveal preconceived ideas and different points of view about their vision in a safe, supportive setting allows them to talk about and clearly articulate their shared ideas. Through the use of a simplified version of a synectics activity, we free up the thinking of the group.

In this example, group members are asked to brainstorm their responses to a carefully crafted prompt designed to promote deeper thinking about the targeted topic. The format is generally, “How is _____ like _____?” In this scenario, we use “How is collaboration like a symphony orchestra?” The brainstorming process reliably elicits such responses as:

- “Both sound better when all play;”
- “A conductor helps bring out the best;”
- “Sometimes some instruments are out of tune;”
- “With practice, we become better;” and
- “The impact we have as a group when we play well is amazing.”

The group then looks for themes and common beliefs and uses these as a basis for building their common vision. We have found this to be a powerful collaborative tool that creates personal meaning for individuals and encourages group members to step back to reflect on (and discover more about) the thinking of others.

Making Meaning Personal

Tool: Text-based discussion

In leadership team or staff discussions, the conversation often goes right to the persuasion mode, where people stake out their positions and then expend a lot of energy defending them. Tempers flare, folks get persnickety, others retreat into silence, and the discussion ends with frustration. Rarely do participants really listen to what others have to say or consider positions other than their own. One way to avoid this scenario is to take time to craft a text-based discussion that actively involves everyone in the room. A text-based discussion:

- Gives everyone the same information to process;
- Ensures that no one person can dominate a discussion, and that no one can remain passive and uninvolved; and
- Builds a sense of community and responsibility within the group.

Consider a scenario where we create a “lesson plan” to help the group develop a common understanding of collaborative leadership. We choose an article about shared leadership, introduce the article in an engaging fashion, and—the most critical step—invite participants to make personal connections with what they have read through interaction with a partner.

A great strategy for this type of interaction is called 30-15-5. The steps are:

- Have everyone find a partner;
- Instruct each person to read the article or a portion of it individually;
- Explain that each partner will have 30 seconds to make a comment about the article. (Comments might include giving a summary statement, asking a question, expressing an opinion, making a connection to something else, or responding to what a partner has said);
- Go back to each partner for a 15-second comment;
- Provide each partner with five seconds to express a last thought; and
- Bring the entire group back together to share some of the ideas that arose during the partner discussions.

This type of activity ensures that everyone shares the same information, participates, and focuses on other points of view.

Giving Everyone a Voice

Tool: Consensogram

How many times do we see staff members advocating for a point of view that they claim “everyone” agrees with, as we

wonder whether or not they truly do have their finger on the pulse of the group? Sometimes we need a way to release the voices of the silent and check the reliability of the noisy! The concept of giving everyone a voice is implicit in collaboration, but it often poses a challenge—especially when extroverts dominate or introverts don’t speak. By using “safe” strategies that require members to reveal their opinions, we have found that we can successfully create equal opportunities for all points of view to be shared.

In this scenario, we would use a consensogram—a strategy that asks the group to display their opinions on a bar graph that forms the basis for “data-driven dialogue.” We set up three charts, each with a different provocative statement across the top:

Chart 1: None of us are as smart as all of us.

Chart 2: We play well as a team.

Chart 3: We need team training.

“The concept of giving everyone a voice is implicit in collaboration.”

Across the bottom are four columns labeled “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Participants vote by stacking sticky notes to create a bar graph above the rating that most closely reflects their opinion. We ask for and record group members’ predictions about the results.

Once the data display is complete, the group is asked to step back and take a look at the results. We ask questions such as: What jumps out at you? What do you see? What surprises you? How do these results compare with your prediction? What actions might we need to take as a result of these data?

The resulting dialogue is often surprising and provides opportunity for the group to agree upon and take meaningful action steps toward greater collaborative leadership.

An added benefit to modeling any of these strategies with teachers is the transfer to their classrooms. It’s always worthwhile to take the time to reflect as a group with a prompt such as, “How might you use this strategy in your own classroom?”

Building Effective Leadership Teams

In our work with leadership teams across North America, we have found that focusing on the practices of establishing a common vision, engaging staff by giving the vision personal

meaning, and giving everyone a voice contributes to a positive school culture. In addition, modeling, reflection, and transfer-ence amplify and reinforce the lessons of effective leadership teams.

When implementing these ideas, begin by modeling the practices or strategies that you want leadership teams to use with one another and the rest of the school staff. Ask members to reflect on the meaning and implications of what they are doing. By providing time for individual and group reflection, you will find that there is greater understanding and acceptance of diversity on the team. Finally, have participants transfer each experience to their own leadership practice. This provides the opportunity for adapting and adopting meaningful, effective practices in their own work. The process creates a powerful and persistent ripple effect that reaches into every classroom and touches each student.

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For More Information

Synectics

www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/bestpractice/synectics/index.html
http://its.guilford.k12.nc.us/act/strategies/Four_Box.htm

Text-based Discussion Protocols

<http://web.grps.k12.mi.us/academics/5E/savethelastword.html>
www.thecenterlibrary.org/cwis/cwisdocs/lit-strategies.pdf

Collaborative Leadership

www.nsd.org/members/jsd/lambert262.pdf

Consensogram

www.iss.k12.nc.us/cao/consensogram.htm
www.greenville.k12.sc.us/bells/baldrige/concens.asp