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Matters

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Increasing Your Leadership Capacity

Good leadership teams communicate effectively, build consensus, understand creative collaboration, and develop professional collegiality.

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Middle schools are structured around teams. However, when the members of a team come together for the first time, they are a group of individuals waiting for a leader to speak up, take charge, and tell the other team members what to do, when to do it, how they will reach agreement, and even who will take the minutes. Everyone is initially dependent on the leader.

However, the group soon reaches a point where more members begin to participate in discussions. They begin to challenge the leader and the initial calm gives way to mild turbulence. As individual members speak out and express their opinions, conflicts begin to emerge. Eventually, this stage will pass as the participants begin to collaborate in establishing goals and objectives, examining alternatives, and making good decisions. They appreciate each other's talents and respect differences. Relationships begin to develop (Wheelan, 1999). The group is becoming a team!

In highly effective teams, the roles of leaders and followers continually shift. Trusting relationships grow and are sustained over time. Decisions are reached through consensus rather than majority opinions. Everyone recognizes that interdependent, collective norms are more important than individual agendas.

Developing the Four C's

Members of highly effective teams have mastered four skills: communicating effectively, building consensus, understanding creative collaboration, and developing a sense of professional collegiality.

Communication begins with listening. Team members must know when to listen and when to speak. As you listen to others, don't think about your reply until they stop talking. Clear your mind, focus on the speaker, and really listen. Pause and think. Then speak. Don't expect that everyone will hear what you say

because what you say is filtered by the listener and is heard through his or her perceptions and past experiences. Highly effective team members check frequently for understanding by asking others what they understood by what you or someone else said.

Consensus. Groups reach agreement by majority rule; teams build consensus by sharing and accepting ideas. On a team, everyone participates, listens, and accepts the final decision. Consensus building does not mean that everyone's first choice is achieved. However, the final decision must not be anyone's last choice, either. Using the "Fist of Five" strategy, each member must agree to accept the decision by holding up three, four, or five fingers. If someone holds up a closed fist or fewer than three fingers, the dialogue continues until everyone reaches an acceptable level of agreement. Once consensus is reached, everyone must agree to support the decision even if it is not his or her first choice.

Collaboration. Teams collaborate. Members respect each other and are willing to listen to divergent viewpoints. They build on these divergent viewpoints to create new alternatives. I may begin with a robin and you may begin with a bluebird. However, when we are finished, a bird emerges that may have some of the characteristics of the robin and the bluebird but, with the diversity of perspectives, is very different from either one. This is what creative collaboration is all about (Hargrove, 1998).

Collegiality depends on establishing an environment in which everyone welcomes and celebrates new ideas. The staff is willing to take risks because new ideas are encouraged. The organizational climate is open rather than disengaged or closed. The principal is supportive and the teachers are collegial. They have nurtured and sustained professional relationships between and among each other. There is a sense of professional intimacy (McEwan, 1997).

Understanding Collective Leadership

The recipe to build highly effective teams begins with mixing the right ingredients. First, leaders must understand the importance of building trusting relationships with others. They must understand how to sustain and strengthen those relationships, even rebuild them when they are fractured. We live in a world that is rich in relationships, with patterns that connect rather than separate. Like a spider's web, each thread is an integral part of the whole maze. If one thread becomes disconnected, the web loses part of its resiliency and strength. "[The spider] reweaves it, using the silken relationships that are already there, creating stronger connections across the weakened spaces" (Wheatley, 1999). Principals similarly must develop and sustain a web of relationships in their schools, in which each thread is dependent on all the other threads.

In building collective leadership, leaders must discard individualism and isolationism in order to create a culture in which everyone is accountable. Principals must be willing to give up control and power. They must intuitively know when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way. Likewise, teachers must be accountable for students, themselves, and one another. When everyone is accountable, and when collectivism overpowers isolationism, a learning community is established in which highly effective teams flourish. This will work best in a school where everyone values collective leadership (Chirichello, 2002), a process in which the collective activities of the principal and teachers set direction, build commitment, and create alignment. Collective leadership creates the context in which highly effective teams can be established and sustained.

Sustaining Momentum

It was a sunny day in Seattle when my wife, Carol, and I decided to take a walk to the downtown market the day before we were to embark on our vacation cruise to Alaska. When we arrived at the market, we heard laughter and voices from a crowd of people at the end of the aisle. We had discovered Seattle's world-famous Pike Place Fish Market, which offers fresh fish and something more—its employees model a highly effective team!

Team members at Pike Place are not customer-centered; they are people-centered. You do not have to be a customer to get their attention. The employees want people to have fun and feel appreciated whether they buy fish or not. They have a great attitude. They sell fish but, more importantly, they sell fun. Through their work, they seek to improve the quality of life for others, and they are committed to this belief. It's what they do. If teams want to sustain momentum, their members should emulate the team from Pike Place Fish Market.

“The recipe to build highly effective teams begins with mixing the right ingredients.”

When Teams Are Dysfunctional

Just as we can move from groups to teams, the reverse is true. Teams can become dysfunctional (Lencioni, 2002). If the team members are no longer able to work collegially, to have a commitment to their goal or purpose, the team will lose its collective synergy. The culture of accountability disappears and blame predominates. It's "he did" and "she did" all over again. Ideas are criticized more than celebrated. Members come to the table with hidden agendas and what you hear is not what was meant. Groupthink takes over when a majority of team members become "yes" people, ideas no longer result from an individual's creativity, and members do not really say what they think.

Be cautious if you sense that some of these threads are becoming unraveled:

Trust is a transactional process. The more each team member trusts the other members, the more the other members trust each other. Trust creates a risk-free environment in which team members are encouraged to try new ideas and not fear failure.

Respect strengthens trust, and in a culture that values respect teams will become highly effective (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000).

Focus on the goal. Do not become sidetracked by meaningless conversations that distract you from the team's goal.

Fun. Don't take yourself too seriously; invite others to play in your sandbox. Be enthusiastic and energetic. Maintain a sense of wonder and curiosity. Create a warm and cozy environment in which others feel comfortable. Celebrate team successes

and recognize accomplishments (Gregerman, 2000).

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