Creating High-Functioning Teacher Teams

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by Gary Schomburg

Principals experience many opportunities for stress. One area of potential stress that can be avoided is the relationship that exists between teachers on academic or grade-level teams. By paying attention to this interpersonal workplace dynamic, principals can create a more positive school climate and reduce the amount of time needed to address staff issues. In a previous article (Schomburg 2005), I suggested that principals should consider such things as leadership styles, experience, and gender when creating these teams. In this article, I will examine these areas more closely and explore the process of teacher integration. Sometimes we learn from negative circumstances as well, so I will also include some examples of “teaching teams gone bad” during my career as a principal.

Leaders and Followers
During the interview or evaluation process, principals can gain information on how a teacher works within a group through comments and behaviors that portray his or her level of flexibility in dealing with students and peers. Some teachers have very strict procedures in the classroom and high expectations of their students. Others are more relaxed and show an appreciation for individual student differences. Principals need to know these qualities because they often carry over to how teachers relate to each other. Knowing that total consistency between teachers may never happen, the principal should attempt to create a healthy mixture of styles. Placing sufficient leadership within each team is crucial to ensuring that the team will function effectively. Too many followers working together could result in basic responsibilities being neglected. Too many strong-willed leaders on a team could result in frequent conflicts. Ideally, academic teams share leadership, with some teachers taking on specific duties during the year to allow their partners to be leaders in other areas.

Youth and Experience
Much has been written about the importance of the first few years of a teacher’s career. The work of Susan Rosenholtz (1991) showed that teacher attitudes and behaviors are direct results of the social organization of the workplace. The socialization process of a new teacher begins in that first year, starting with the matching of the new teacher with others on their academic team. These teaching partners have the strongest impact on the new teacher through daily interaction. Taking this under consideration, principals should place new staff carefully, not only for the benefit of the new teacher, but also considering the veteran teachers, who can be reenergized with the infusion of youthful enthusiasm. The danger of placing too many new or young teachers on one team is that they make youthful mistakes when there is no one to provide veteran advice. It is usually better to spread the less-experienced teachers across the school staff, providing them with positive mentors and allowing them to spread their youthful enthusiasm to others in a safe environment.

Gender
Because it is important to provide students with exposure to a variety of adult role models, principals should spread their male teachers across the school rather than cluster them. Whether it is gender, race, or ethnicity, I think it is important that students be presented with a mixture of adults in their school life. When they leave school, students will have to deal with all types of people, and the more diversity that we can provide them in school, the better.

Forced Transfers
Much of what has been discussed assumes that the principal has the authority, or the will, to make staff placement decisions and changes within the school. However, the principal should consider how aggressive to be in making these changes. Forced changes can create morale issues on a staff unless the principal possesses exemplary persuasive skills. Normal staff changes such as retirements, resignations, and transfers, present opportunities for principals to move new teachers into teams. But if the principal concludes that a forced change has to take place, it is important to consider if situations on both sides of the move benefit from it.
In other words, don’t trade one problem for another. If the problem is an ineffective teacher, don’t move the teacher in hopes that a stronger team will salvage the teacher’s career. I have seen strong teams “prop up” a weak teacher for a period of time, but an ineffective teacher will eventually weaken that team and the school as a whole. It is better to do the proper evaluation procedures and remove the weak teacher.

Integration of New Teachers

In our state, we receive funds to conduct an entry-year teacher program that includes a stipend for teaching mentors. Typically, this mentor is on the same academic team or grade level as the first-year teacher, allowing the matched pair to work closely together all year. A second way to integrate the new teacher into the team is to involve the team in the selection process. However, a disadvantage of this method of selection is that the team may not perceive its needs in the same way as the principal. Where the principal may think the team needs strong leadership, the team may value flexibility. In that scenario, it is up to the principal to conduct some sort of soul-searching process within that team to help shape agreed-upon traits in candidates. A third key component in integrating new teachers into teams is to make the move in time for the teachers to get together over the summer.

Good Teams Gone Bad

In my years as a middle-grades principal, I have seen many more great teams than bad ones, but since we also learn from our mistakes, let’s review some common characteristics of “teams gone bad.”

Personal Conflict. A few of my teams have disintegrated due to personal issues. Marriages, divorces, and family feuds are just a few of the personal issues that make it impossible for certain people to work within the same team. Unfortunately, a personal situation that requires a move often forces some other uninvolved person to move also, which is not fair. However, life is not always fair and the principal must deal with the situation for the benefit of the school.

Conflict in Styles. Controlling styles need to be complemented by flexible styles to make an effective team. There have been teams where several teachers with a need to control have been paired together. Teams cannot stand more than one controlling figure. There is only so much control to go around, and I have had to make moves based on spreading out these strong personalities.

Complacency. There is a fine line between a team being labeled a fine-tuned machine and actually being stuck in the mud. If I hear team members bragging about their system that has been in place for many years, I worry about how much they are challenging each other to improve. I once opened a new school, inheriting teachers who had worked together for many years in other settings. We purposely separated them so they could interact with teachers from other backgrounds. It was tough at first, but I think all of the teachers learned from working with new people.

The principal’s job is hard enough as it is. I think it is one of the most difficult jobs within the management realm because of the dual importance of having to work well with both students and adults. My advice is to make the job more enjoyable by putting effort into creating high-functioning teaching teams. This will release principals to be instructional leaders within their school, rather than referees.

References


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