Playing the Teacher Match Game

A common theme in literature and media over the years has been matching people in relationships, both at work and in their personal lives. Reality television has picked up on this theme with all types of scenarios, such as putting a group of people in a house and observing how they relate to each other. The basic idea of these programs is that there are specific characteristics each of us possesses, and how we interact with others, with their own unique characteristics, can lead to interesting outcomes.

These shows remind me of my experience as principal of two middle grades schools in matching teachers to provide happy and productive teams. It is a critical challenge because how these teams function determines the success of the students and the school as a whole.

My first task as a principal was to create a new sixth-grade school, using sixth-grade teachers from five different elementary schools in the district. The new school was to be organized around academic teaching teams, and my challenge was to assemble a cohesive staff from this group as quickly as possible.

Some of the lessons learned from that experience have stayed with me through my administrative career:

Respect teachers’ anxiety about changing their work environment. Many of these teachers had taught in the same school for more than 25 years, and had worked with the same partners for a long time. Some of them experienced anxiety about packing and moving materials, leaving a familiar environment, and working with new people.

Give teachers a chance to become familiar with one another before placing them on teams. We held meetings in the spring, prior to the move, to let the staff work cooperatively on operational details for the new school. They visited other schools that had been through similar experiences and attended a one-day retreat during the summer, where they got to know one another on an informal basis while working in teams on problem-solving activities. Finally, we announced the placement of teachers on academic teams early enough so that the new teams had time during the summer to meet on their own to plan team activities.

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Match teachers to create a healthy balance of characteristics. This “match game” came down to considering which teachers might work together most productively. Teachers were asked to submit requests for team placement based on subject area strengths and teammate preferences. The matching process attempted to balance leaders and followers, youth and experience, and males and females. No formal personality assessments were administered; my selections were based on interviews with teachers and their former supervisors, along with personal observations of their behaviors at planning meetings and the retreat.

Give new teams time to build relationships, but be willing to start over. Just as in marriages, not all team relationships work out as planned. Some teams requested changes, while retirements and attrition also made it necessary to experiment with new team match-ups.

As newly hired teachers were added to the staff, team teachers were highly involved in the selection process.

I later moved on to a middle school where instruction in the seventh and eighth grades was similarly structured around teaching teams. Looking back on both experiences, I found that successful teams share these characteristics:

Effective communication. Teachers on successful academic teams talk to one another on a regular basis, and common planning time is crucial for this purpose. Teachers on teams also communicate a coordinated and consistent message to students and parents.

Mutual respect. Nothing destroys team chemistry more than the perception that members of the team do not respect one another. All team members should be included in planning and decision-making. Disagreements must be dealt with professionally and away from the students, who are often the first to detect a rift between teachers on a team.

Leadership. Within any team, a mutually acceptable form of leadership must develop. On some teams, there is a recognized leader who has the respect of other team members. On other successful teams, leadership is shared depending on the task at hand.

Recognition of individual talents. Part of determining team leadership is the realization that each member brings different talents to the team. Whether the talent is large-group presentations, creation of imaginative units, field trip organization, or interdisciplinary planning, successful teams determine which teacher best fits specific leadership situations.

Just as in a successful marriage or personal relationship, team chemistry is a strong predictor of success in middle grades schools. Keep this in mind when playing the teacher match game.

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