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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO COLLABORATION

*5 principles for reviving problematic groups*

By Bradley A. Ermeling

The principal of a large urban middle school in the Midwest asked for my guidance as a researcher and advisor to help make their teams' collaboration times more productive. The principal especially needed help with one teacher team whose meetings were suffocating from tension and hostility.

When teachers on the team were asked to describe what happened during collaboration times, many responses included such confrontational behaviors as shouting, poor listening, hostility, negativity, arguing about unimportant topics, and reading uninformative books.

When I met with the team, I made two observations: "One, you don't like unproductive and contentious meetings, and, two, you would like to have meetings that are productive and focused on improving teaching and learning. Does anyone disagree with that?"

The room was quiet. Their silent agreement defined

a critical choice point. Some might have suggested team-building activities to exorcise the hostile social dynamics standing in the way of effective collaboration time — an approach that assumes attitudes must change before behavior changes. I assumed the opposite: behavior change is followed by attitude change.

I asked, "Can we all agree to suspend those behaviors that are disrupting productive work?" Heads nodded, so I continued, "Then let's get started by developing an agenda."

We started searching for a common student need, a pressing concern that the group thought essential to meet for them to be successful. Turning away from the highly abstract, philosophical

questions that had led to so much conflict was what this group needed, not team building activities.

Behavior change preceding attitude and belief changes is a staple narrative in literature, popular media, and personal anecdotes. Popular sports-themed movies often

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share the same basic plot: a warring group of players rife with conflict gets a new coach who gradually knits together a team dedicated to a common goal. Players who did not like each other begin to work together through demanding effort and initial setbacks because each is in pursuit of the same outcome.

That is what happened with the middle school team.

The principal and I had monthly calls in between each of my monthly visits. On those calls she would provide a synopsis of how things were going with each of her teacher teams and particularly this problematic group. She regularly attended their meetings to support the facilitator and tried to help moderate some of the contentious dialogue. She confided she had stopped trying to change their behavior through talk and recognized the futility of that approach.

Perhaps the most important thing the principal did was free up time in team meetings to focus on the new pattern of work we had initiated, which was identifying student instructional needs and working on plans for addressing them. She gave the teachers permission to discontinue some of the other less-defined activities, such as book studies, general discussions of students, etc. These were leaving too much room for unproductive dialogue, debate, and conflict and were too far removed from teachers' daily classroom practice.

The principal worked hard to mentor and assist the team facilitator in following the same approach modeled during my visits. Team members began to see this cycle of improvement as the new expectation for how they spent their meeting time, not just a short-lived experience for one or two meetings. The principal also made sure to celebrate the team's success in the larger school community, praising their efforts in staff meetings and highlighting positive results.

A few months after my initial visit, I returned for another series of meetings and discovered dramatic changes had taken place.

Following the pattern set in motion during my previous visit, the principal and team facilitator made a weekly commitment to action-oriented agendas that continued to focus on planning, implementing, and reflecting on instruction related to student needs identified and shared by the group.

In the meeting I observed, the facilitator started the meeting on time, reviewed the agenda, and initiated a brainstorming process to identify promising instructional approaches for helping students with reading comprehension problems. A few times during the discussion, I

observed a team member physically hold her hand over her mouth in effort to suppress an impulsive response that previously might have derailed the meeting. By the end of the meeting, the team had outlined basic actions steps for a lesson and all members had contributed to the discussion and planning.

When the problematic team of teachers first began working on a shared problem, they did not like each other

very much and shared no common instructional philosophy. But once they established a common goal for student learning, and agreed on benchmarks for measuring success, a new pattern of successful interactions was set in motion, defined by a sense of shared purpose and urgency to improve student outcomes. The debating was over; the collaborating had begun.

Not all cases are this successful. Getting a conflicted group to stop arguing and start working on concrete steps to improve teaching and learning is seldom seamless and easy, but there are five key principles that have worked in most of the cases I know about.

### **Learning Forward BELIEF**

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.



### **FIND A SHARED CONCERN**

No matter how conflicted a teacher team has become, in many cases there are persistent student achievement challenges that a majority recognize and share. When a team zeroes in on specific areas of need, and relates them to their own classrooms, it is often possible to identify one area the majority is eager to address.

Once a shared goal is identified, the old conflicts fade into the background. Some individuals may still not like each other very much, but like a sports team tired of losing, a conflicted group of teachers focusing on a shared student need can temporarily suspend old antagonisms enough to get productive collaboration going. Principals can move this process forward by creating and prioritizing time for the team to directly focus on identifying and addressing common student instructional needs.



### **ESTABLISH TEACHER OWNERSHIP**

So how is a cohesive goal identified? It is vital, regardless of the student need selected, that the teachers set and share the goal themselves as they review available sources of evidence. The principal or other administrative leaders might suggest several key areas of need to choose from, but the goal chosen has to be one most teachers on a team see as immediately relevant to their own classrooms. Some examples are struggles with comprehension of expository

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tory text, understanding ratios and proportions, writing coherent paragraphs, etc. Leadership should keep at the forefront a team's commitment to work together to develop instruction once a shared problem is identified. Doing something together to make a difference in everyone's classroom wins more support than talking about individual problems and leaving it to individuals to come up with answers.



### GET A COMMITMENT TO MEETING GUIDELINES

A commitment to meeting guidelines is not a new concept, but taking this step seriously accomplishes two things. First, it provides a teacher team with a set of agreed-upon norms or operating principles. Second, agreeing upon a set of meeting guidelines provides everyone with license to hold colleagues accountable and run meetings in accordance with the guidelines. Here are the keys: Principals help teams establish and publish their guidelines, distribute them to everyone, and review them at strategic intervals by reflecting on meeting effectiveness.

Guidelines or norms are only a starting point, though. They have limited impact with the most challenging groups unless accompanied by the other key principles and supported by leadership. Principals protect the team by removing or reducing other collaborative tasks or activities that might derail new routines and productive work.



### EXPECT PRODUCTIVE ACTION

The middle school team I was called to help had spent several meetings during the previous school year carefully outlining group norms. Despite the group's good intentions and lengthy discussions about norms, their meetings still degenerated into unproductive and often contentious battles. Why? They never transitioned from talking to action. They needed to ask themselves this question every meeting: Are we going to do something or just talk about it? When teams consistently engage in productive action, there is a corresponding shift in mindset, beliefs, and expectations. Even the most problematic teams usually improve their attitudes and beliefs regarding collaboration, if they collectively accomplish things that have a direct and positive impact on their teaching.

Principals can mentor the team leader to plan agendas and productively facilitate meetings that focus on the cycle of improvement. At the same time, principals should monitor their own behavior when joining team meetings so as to not raise other administrative topics or issues that might distract the team from their agenda and work.



### STRATEGIZE ACCORDING TO TEAMS AND INDIVIDUALS

Many teams will excel by establishing common goals, teacher ownership, meeting guidelines, and action-oriented routines.

However, some schools will have at least one team or a few individuals who are still obstinate, unhappy, or difficult to work with regardless of how deliberate others are about engaging in cycles of productive learning and problem solving.

The middle school team had one teacher that was especially unhappy. She came to meetings, sat against the wall rather than joining the rest of the group at the table, made sarcastic comments, rolled her eyes, and generally refused to participate. The principal and I decided to feature her work as an example for the group in order to vest her with some ownership in the process. The principal met with the disgruntled teacher and asked for a group demonstration of her use of a graphic organizer to help students summarize main ideas and details. The teacher hesitated at first but agreed to participate and, to the group's surprise, came to the meeting fully prepared with an attitude and manner her colleagues had never witnessed. While there were still ups and downs with her meeting behavior across the year, improvement was dramatic and the group itself gained momentum from observing this noticeable shift in the engagement and attitude of its most negative member.

Principals can work directly with individual teams or team members where extra strategic attention is needed. This can seem overwhelming if all groups are struggling to work productively, but if the majority of teams move forward through a commitment to guidelines and establishing a framework and routine for successful action, then investing this kind of focused effort on a few persistent cases becomes a more reasonable and manageable task.

As the year came to a close, the principal and I reflected on the remarkable progress that she had previously thought impossible. The change did not happen from increasing pressure or accountabilities, and it did not come from prolonged trust-building activities or discussions about becoming a team. The meeting guidelines came to life when the principal provided a clear framework for meaningful work and assertively engaged the teachers in successful actions. Attitudes and beliefs changed in response to new, more productive behaviors, galvanizing faculty with renewed hope and confidence in the power of collaboration.

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## Principal reflection chart for reviving problematic groups

Use this tool to reflect upon and prioritize actions to better support and/or revitalize staff groups.

1. Identify a team that particularly needs your attention.
2. For each category of *principal actions*, use the following scale to reflect on the *current status* of the identified team.
  - ✓ = Area of strength. Already implemented.
  - ? = Needs more attention but work is under way.
  - ★ = High priority. Not yet implemented.
3. For items marked with a ? or ★, write down specific *notes and next steps*.

**TEAM NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

PRINCIPAL ACTIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE	CURRENT STATUS	NOTES AND NEXT STEPS
Create and prioritize time for the team that directly focuses on identifying and addressing common student instructional needs.		
Protect the team's focus by removing or reducing collaborative tasks/activities that might derail new routines and productive work.		
Assist the team to establish and publish meeting guidelines.		
Mentor the team leader to plan agendas and productively facilitate meetings.		
Monitor your own behavior when joining team meetings so as to not raise other administrative topics or issues that might distract the team from their agenda and work.		
Work directly with individual team members where extra strategic attention is needed.		
Celebrate successes within the larger staff and school community to reinforce the new productive patterns and routines.		

Source: Bradley A. Ermeling (brad.ermeling@gmail.com), senior research associate at Pearson Learning Teams.