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## Teacher Teams That Work

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### Teacher Teams that Work

Andi Mitchell was a seventh grade social studies teacher at Hamilton Middle School (HMS). She taught and served as a teacher leader at HMS for fifteen years. Andi was considered to be a master teacher by many of her peers who supervised many student teachers and practicum students in their field experiences. On numerous occasions, Mrs. Castillo—the principal at HMS—asked Andi to serve as a team leader as well as chair for the social studies department at HMS. Andi was respected and regarded as a leader by students, faculty, and HMS administration.

Andi was anxious about the new teacher teams at her middle school. She had worked with her old team for four years and served as the team leader for the past two years. The “Gold” team knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses and was known at the middle school as one of the “strong” teams. Their ability to get things done was legendary at HMS, and everyone knew they worked like a well-oiled machine. Heck, they even spent lots of time together outside of school. Their families knew each other, and their kids even attended each other’s birthday parties. As teachers were preparing to close out the academic year, they were shocked by an announcement that the principal was going “shake things up a bit” by making some changes to the teams for the upcoming school year. Startled and upset, Andi immediately marched into the Principal Castillo’s office to protest the decision to reassign faculty teams. Mrs. Castillo listened to Andi for over an hour as she cried and ranted, but the principal stood firm on her decision.

When Andi arrived the first day of teacher professional development in August, the new teams were posted on chart paper around the room. Hamilton Middle School was a large school with over 65 teachers. She nervously scanned the room and noticed her old Gold team members, and others, crying and shaking their heads. Some teachers were smiling and laughing and greeting each other warmly. Finally, she found her name! Her heart sank as she read the names

of the teachers on her new team. Out of the six names, there were three that she knew she would never be able to work with. First was Ron, who was known around the school as the hippie rebel; then there was Becky, the introvert, who never said a word to anyone; finally, there was Maria, who everyone labeled as the laziest teacher at HMS. The other two names were difficult to read because tears began to blur her vision.

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Many middle school teachers can relate to this scenario. Interdisciplinary teaming, where two or more teachers work together with a common group of students, has long been recognized as a key element of successful middle schools (AMLE, 2010). Research shows that effective interdisciplinary teams result in improved student achievement and self-esteem, increased parental involvement, and an overall positive school environment (Felner et al., 1997; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). Lounsbury (1991) further highlights the implications of interdisciplinary teaming by acknowledging that “no single education idea has come to characterize the middle school concept as certainly as interdisciplinary teaming” (p. 58).

Teacher teams are charged with numerous tasks that may include curriculum planning and integration, reviewing data to make instructional decisions, examining student work and behavior, problem solving, and individual student concerns. This is a challenge for even the most experienced team. Effective teamwork does not just happen; it takes work. In the earlier scenario, Andi and her new team will most likely progress through a series of developmental phases as they learn to work together. In this manuscript, we provide some practical advice for teacher teams that are struggling to collaborate and work together efficiently and effectively.

### **Phases of Team Development**

Four or five teachers grouped together who do not know each other cannot automatically become a functioning team. It is important that the team have the support of the principal as they

begin to work together to become an effective interdisciplinary team. This is a process that takes a strong commitment of time and effort. Vick (2001) describes four phases that teams experience as they develop. These include forming, storming, norming, and performing and are described in more detail below.

### **Forming**

During the forming stage, team members get better acquainted and began to determine the different roles each will play as a member of the team. This is the time when team members may feel excited and optimistic, or perhaps very anxious and apprehensive about their new team, just as Andi did in the scenario. At this stage, team members should begin to agree on the purpose of their team, establish the norms or ground rules, and set future goals. During this stage, team members are typically on good behavior and attempt to get along with one another.

### **Storming**

As the name implies, the storming stage can be full of conflict and is a time when team members challenge new ideas. Team members are more comfortable in sharing their ideas and frustrations. Oftentimes, there are disagreements on the balance of work and responsibilities within the team roles. On the other hand, this stage is also characterized by positive developments such as creativity and productivity. Incremental steps toward moving the team forward slowly begin to take form. Administrative support is vital as teams move through this storming phase.

### **Norming**

Over time, the team begins to work together more efficiently and resolves many of their former difficulties. This is referred to as the norming stage. The team begins to feel more cohesive and is able to accomplish goals and solve problems efficiently and effectively. One

concern that can surface during this stage is that teacher team members may want to prevent conflict and may avoid bringing up or sharing divisive ideas in order to avoid conflict. It is important that the team continue to communicate openly and honestly. An effective team in the norming stage will make progress toward improving instruction, problem-solving, and supporting students.

### **Performing**

Finally, during the performing stage of team development, the team works so well that they are able to accomplish whatever tasks they are challenged with and simultaneously deals with any conflicts that arise. During this stage, it sometimes appears that a leader is not needed because all team members are pulling equal weight, but the leader is needed to help continue the energy and to push the team to conquer new challenges that arise. A high performing team works together to plan integrated instruction and provide support for students. Teams in this stage are likely to celebrate accomplishments together.

It is important to recognize the strengths and challenges that each member brings to the team. Some members are natural leaders, some work hard without recognition, and others may barely participate. It is also important to understand that teams will fluctuate as team members come and go. The Developing Team Questionnaire (see Appendix A) is an exceptional tool for evaluating at what level the team is functioning. The questionnaire is adapted from Moran, Musselwhite, and Zenger (1996, p. 269-274). The section that follows describes four common roles observed as teachers work together in teams. You may recognize some of your own team members!

## Teaming Roles

Teaching teams must work together to set goals, make decisions, and solve problems. It is important that team members evaluate their participation in the team to determine if their behavior builds or subverts the team's effectiveness. Team members' behavior may exhibit characteristics of one of the following styles originally developed by William Wilkerson (Garner, 2012).

**Wishbones.** This team member knows what needs to be done but lacks the motivation to actively make it happen. She or he is on board with the idea, but wishes someone else would do the work.

**Jawbones.** This member is very outspoken in team meetings and is never slow to give an opinion. However, there is little action beyond the talk. This person may monopolize the time in the team meeting and frustrate others in the group with all the talk with little action.

**Knucklebones.** The knucklebones on the team are very critical. They are quick to “knock” what everyone else does. However, they typically do not have constructive suggestions for change, nor do they participate in the work required to make the team initiatives work.

**Backbones.** These are the team members who get things done. They get busy and do any work required.

With all these different team styles and individual personalities, it is important to understand how decisions are made. There are several processes that are common in teams as they work together to make decisions. The following section discusses pros and cons for these processes.

## **Decision Making**

Making decisions as a team takes time and energy. It is often tempting to make a team decision quickly by a vote or simply allowing the team leader to make decisions. However, such practices are not best for a well-functioning team. Many types of decisions create situations where there are winners and losers. Those who perceive themselves as losers may sabotage the project or decision of the group. Typical decision making styles include majority rule (vote), minority rule (one or two team members making the decision), autocracy (one person making all decisions), autocracy with polling (one person polls the group and makes the final decision), decision by non-decision (no conclusion is reached), and consensus.

It takes hard work and negotiation to reach a consensus decision that all members of the team can live with. Steele (1984) referred to three important points in regard to consensus decision-making. The first important point is that all members of the team need to feel that they have been heard and understood by the group. That means everyone on the team should voice an opinion without fear of being put down or disrespected and have confidence that others will listen and try to understand their perspectives. Secondly, all members must be able to “live with” (not sabotage) the decision or the solution for an agreed upon time period. Finally, all team members must be willing to commit to carrying out the plan. One strategy to determine consensus after a thorough discussion of the issue a proposal is made if for each member to signal with a thumbs up (agree completely), thumbs down (no- can't live with it), or thumb to the side (I can live with it). If all members do not signal with thumbs up or thumb to the side, the discussion continues until a solution is reached with no thumbs down. While reaching consensus may take time, the team's effort to reach consensus results in an energized team with a common goal to work toward is worth the effort.

### **Tips for Success**

Middle-level teachers have many challenges and pressures. It is easy to understand why some feel that meeting with the team is just one more obligation that takes up their time. Most schools will identify a teacher on each team as a team leader. It is important that the team leader facilitate the team in a way that respects the time of the other members of the team. The first task of the team in the forming stage is developing a team mission and norms. Other important decisions include when to meet, how often to meet, agendas, length of the meeting, etc. It is important for all to understand the reasons for the team and what is important for the team to accomplish. Berkmeier (2013) suggested that teams often talk about kids, discuss curriculum, work on professional development goals, work on team logistics, meet with parents and students, review student data, and various other tasks related to students and instruction. Berkmeier warns about the mistake of allowing housekeeping tasks to monopolize team meetings and about maintaining the focus on students, curriculum, instruction, professional development, and other student-centered business.

Various technology tools available today can assist teachers with team communication and help alleviate time constraints placed on them. Common planning time in today's middle schools is often non-existent due to factors such as content intervention time with students and school budget constraints. Bishop and Downs (2014), suggested using the Google Doc tool for team members to collaborate on creating meeting agendas, calendars, and to-do lists. The authors maintained that with these types of tools, and other similar tools, "teams are no longer limited by school hours to complete their important work" (p. 44).

It is important that individual team members behave in ways that facilitate the effectiveness and improve the team's consensus building. Maurer (2014) stressed that building

strong teams can be quite challenging. He described his experiences with team-building sessions such as retreats, ropes-courses, and skits based on scenarios as not making a difference in the long run. Maurer recommended keeping team development, and if needed, team intervention, as simple and direct as possible using the following guidelines:

- Always have a clear goal and ensure that members of the team can verbalize what the goal is;
- Any actions of the team must support movement towards the goal;
- Explore barriers that are blocking progress such as setting realistic priorities (not taking on too many new projects) and competition amongst group members; and
- Explore internal roadblocks such as a lack of a comprehensive decision-making process or persons or sub-groups who are interfering with the team's work.

Interventions, when necessary, should include discussions that focus on the issue as it pertains to the team and the team's performance rather than on the individual and why team members are not getting along with each other (Maurer, 2014). Moreover, Maurer notes that focusing on whether or not people get along is not the most important aspect in team development. He points out that "there are quite a few examples in music and sports where tensions abounded on teams, and the results achieved still were phenomenal" (p. 14). Middle school administrators and team leaders could use these team development suggestions as a guide to assist teacher teams in developing into strong, well-functioning teams.

### **Conclusion**

As you read in the opening scenario, Andi is dealing with difficult changes to her new team. Teaming is not easy, but the effort to become a well-functioning team is crucial and worthwhile. When teachers come together to work in conjunction with each other for the benefit of their students, great things can happen. Students have a keen sense in knowing when their teachers are working together effectively and when they are in discord. Andi and her new team

need guidance from their school's leadership as they navigate the stages of working together as a team. Andi's new team also needs to understand the evolution and stages that a new team undergoes: forming, norming, storming, and performing. Understanding the stages teams will go through can help everyone involved have realistic expectations for the team. Team leaders will be more effective if they understand the personalities of their team members and learn how to work with each personality: jawbones, wishbones, knucklebones, and backbones. All team members will benefit from understanding how to reach consensus when they disagree.

In today's political economy, teaming is often "on the chopping block." In order to help districts, administrators, and others understand the importance of teaming, it is essential that schools develop high-performing teams whose members can work together and reach consensus when disagreements occur. A well-functioning team is an asset to any school but reaching that point takes knowledge, skills, guidance, and hard work.

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**Appendix A**  
**Developing Team Stages Questionnaire**

Directions: For each item, rate how much time your team spends on this activity. Base your ratings on the majority of the meetings and activities for the previous month. If your team has not worked on a particular activity, do not rate the item. Identify each activity on a scale from 1 to 5.

- 1 = spend almost no time on this activity.
- 2 = spend a little time on this activity.
- 3 = spend time occasionally on this activity.
- 4 = spend time regularly on this activity.
- 5 = spend a lot of time on this activity.

**Forming**

	1	2	3	4	5
Team members are getting to know the names and job responsibilities of other members.					
Teams are deciding on their roles and responsibilities based on people's strengths and interests.					
Team members are on their best behavior and try hard to get along with the others.					
Teams are establishing their goals and defining their purpose.					
Team norms are being determined.					

Total of the numbers checked in this stage \_\_\_\_\_

**Storming**

	1	2	3	4	5
Members are having frequent conflicts with one another.					
Team members are questioning their ability to accomplish their goals.					
Team members are discussing how to balance individual and team work loads.					
Team members are challenging new ideas.					
Team members are becoming frustrated with their roles on the team.					

Total of the numbers checked in this stage \_\_\_\_\_

**Norming**

	1	2	3	4	5
Team members resolve their difficulties directly with other team members.					
Most of the team's time is spent focusing on the assigned work.					
A person on the team takes responsibility for limiting suggestions to avoid missing a deadline.					
Members work within the ground rules, roles, and processes agreed to by the team.					
Team members accept the team leader and are eager to have this person succeed in his or her duties.					

Total of the numbers checked in this stage \_\_\_\_\_

**Performing**

	1	2	3	4	5
The majority of the team interactions are efficient and enjoyable.					
Team measures are frequently achieved by participation from all team members.					
Team members suggest innovative alternatives to meet goals in an efficient way.					
Members can challenge one another without getting personal or defensive.					
The team seems to be functioning well with little direction or guidance from the team leader.					

Total of the numbers checked in this stage \_\_\_\_\_

**Fill in the scores for each stage below.**

Forming \_\_\_\_\_ Storming \_\_\_\_\_ Norming \_\_\_\_\_ Performing \_\_\_\_\_

**Stage with highest score** \_\_\_\_\_

After you find the stage with your highest score, read the profile below for a description of your team and the performance of its members.

**Forming**

Early on, members get to know one another and begin sorting out their roles. They need to agree on a purpose as a team, to set goals, and to establish norms or ground rules. Both you and the rest of your team may feel excited, enthusiastic, or anxious – all at the same time – as you are all on your best behavior.

**Storming**

The unsettling, but inevitable second stage is marked by conflict among team members, between supervisors or managers and the team, and between the team and the organization. On the positive side, people are asking questions, negotiating tradeoffs, and even challenging the team leader. This is a creative and productive time because team members are getting comfortable with new ideas, yet conflict breeds resentment, and team members can become frustrated.

**Norming**

Gradually, team members resolve many of their difficulties, learn how to focus on the work, and enter a norming phase. The problem now is that team members may be so determined to prevent further conflict that they do not share controversial ideas and avoid dealing with delicate situations.

**Performing**

Finally, team members figure out how to maintain smooth relations and get the job done at the same time. They deal with conflicts as they arise, challenge ideas without getting personal, operate at peak performance, and take pride in their success. At times, the team hardly seems to need a leader. However, the leader is needed to maintain the team’s momentum by introducing new challenges.

Adapted from: Moran, L., Musselwhite, E., & Zenger, J. (1996). *Keeping teams on track: What to do when the going gets rough*. New York, NY: Irwin Professional Publishing