Create a culture of inquiry and develop productive groups

During my last visit to Southeast Asia, I was struck by the extent and variety of teacher collaboration on such activities as developing benchmarks and assessments to meet standards, producing unit plans, and reflecting on student work. In two International School Districts, one in Kuala Lumpur and the other in Jakarta, teachers and administrators work together to accomplish these tasks and improve their collaboration skills.

As evidence mounts that student learning is the result of collaborative effort, teachers will increasingly need skills to conduct productive meetings in which they generate the know-how and will to improve instruction, raise student achievement, and enhance professional community. However, creating such cultures of inquiry and developing productive groups is much easier said than done.

During the last decade, we have learned that restructuring efforts are useful but not sufficient to improve learning. Sadly, through initiatives in several states, we also have discovered that assigning money and control to the school level led to changes at some schools, but no changes in most schools, let alone improvements in student learning (Joyce, 2004). We also know that even well-structured professional development initiatives are ineffective when they lack practical follow-through phases in which applications are practiced, self-assessed, and modified.

Similarly, in Adaptive Schools work, we are finding that training in norms of collaboration, structures for discussion and dialogue, and meeting standards take root in some schools and not others. What makes the difference? Assuming the training has been extensive enough for participants to develop procedural knowledge (skills), three factors differentiate schools that create a culture of inquiry:

- Leaders who continuously communicate clear and compelling rationale and are public learners who actively participate in the practices being studied;
- Leaders who locate and arrange time and space for teacher collaboration, including weeding out information items from faculty agendas to make room for conversations about learning; and
- The frequency and caliber of self-reflection that occurs after the professional development sequence is done. These three factors are the secret to positive change.

At the International Schools of Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, an emphasis on product is added — systemwide initiatives in which teachers use collaborative skills to collectively plan units.

GET COMMITMENT OR JUST DO IT?

For some time, educators have had a chicken-egg argument regarding professional development. Does commitment come before competence — or the other way around? My sense is that both are true.

To begin to create an environment in which teachers effectively use collaborative skills to conduct productive meetings requires training. Teachers are fine learners and, under the proper conditions, put learning to work. When they know how to do something, they do it. Yet teachers most often work in isolation, and professional learning programs seldom invest time in teaching teachers to work with adults. Professional development in this area is a must.

So training teachers to work collaboratively with other adults is necessary. But what then? The best follow-up to training in meeting management and collaboration comes from self-examination.

SELF-EXAMINATION IS PRACTICAL FOLLOW-THROUGH

It is a myth that feedback alone improves team effectiveness. At DuPont and Colgate-Palmolive, members of teams listened to feedback from peers, supervisors, and subordinates about how to be better workers so they could better understand their impact on others and improve their effectiveness working together (Sanford, 1995). In fact, the exact opposite occurred. Feedback undermined these goals and produced negative side effects. DuPont and Colgate-Palmolive changed its commitment to practices that help workers build their capability for self-reflection and self-assessment.

Sanford concludes that external feedback actually reduces one’s capacity for accurate self-reflection. Continuing feedback reinforces our expectation that others...
will and should tell us how we are doing, and it reduces our capacity to be self-reflective and self-accountable. By feedback, I mean observations from others about one’s performance, particularly when the information is judgmental (“You made a good synthesis when ...”) or accompanied with advice (“Next time you might consider ...”). In related work, she reports this also to be true for 9- and 10-year-olds.

For groups to be productive, group members must spend time self-assessing to improve self-management. Self-monitoring questions can help the group clarify its intentions and help members know when to use a behavior, how much and in what form, when to change a behavior, and how to know one’s choice is sound. Focusing on each of these points sharpens behavioral learning. Each can serve as a topic for self-reflective process questions in seminars and meetings.

Meetings improve when groups reflect about their work. Productive groups provide time and structures for members to self-reflect on questions such as: “What were some of the decisions you made about when and how to participate? What were the effects of those decisions on you and on others?” The group facilitator poses good questions, allows think time, and has members either write responses or share with neighbors. When the group does this frequently, members sharpen meta-cognitive skills, and better behavior results. Team effectiveness is increased (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Groups also improve their meetings by distributing a Likert-scale questionnaire at the end of each meeting. Members rate each item from 1 to 5. The questionnaire is designed around any principle on which the group is working. Three principles most useful to meeting success are:

- Stay on only one topic at a time;
- Use only one process at a time; and
- Ensure balanced participation.

Members complete the form and hand it in as they exit the meeting. Before the next meeting, the data are organized into a display that shows the distribution of responses. For the first 10 minutes of that subsequent meeting, the group considers the question, “Given that this is what we said about ourselves last time, what do we want to work on today?” Doing this regularly pays high dividends.

Most groups have more work to do than they have time, yet the only way to improve is through reflection. Contrary to popular belief, we do not learn from experience, only from reflecting on experience.

Groups that are improving commit to a task to process ratio, agreeing to set aside time at each meeting to reflect on their work. Bruce Wellman and I have come to believe that any group that is too busy to reflect is too busy to improve.

Developing productive groups will become increasingly important as teacher groups take the forefront in the work that must occur to improve student achievement. We can facilitate the effectiveness of this effort by helping teachers learn to work collaboratively with other adults and to build their capability for self-reflection and self-assessment. Groups whose members commit to these principles will be productive.

REFERENCES


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