What groups talk about matters – and how they talk matters, too

A common assumption found in education literature is that developing professional communities will result in increased student learning. While there is much truth to this, there is more to the story. Certain topics and ways in which teachers talk are essential to improve teaching and learning. Professional development leaders working with groups can improve the group’s capacity by improving what teachers talk about and how they talk.

Collaborative groups encounter three challenges. One is a tendency, typical when groups first form, to talk not about instruction, but instead about the logistics of working together. The second challenge is to overcome the tendency to have conversations that lack inquiry, reflection, analysis, challenge, and invention. Some groups face a third challenge: letting interpersonal dynamics detract from the group’s work. Many professional development activities rightfully address these areas in order to achieve professional communities in which student learning improves.

Two combined approaches to these challenges can result in sustainable change. First, leaders focus groups and set expectations that teachers will skillfully talk about student work and apply accountability data to inform their instruction. Such leaders provide professional development on, among other topics, data analysis, ways of talking, and intellectually challenging ideas related to student learning. The second approach is to develop the capacity in groups to create internal sources of excellence.

Teachers’ behaviors are manifestations of excellence — the things of performance — not the roots or origins. From Charles Garfield’s study (1986) of peak performers to Margaret Wheatley’s (1999) insightful applications of quantum physics to leadership to current research in learning and organizational development, we find that invisible factors (energy) drive peak-performing individuals and groups.

Effective leaders sense this and work to develop five energy sources that fuel sustained high performance: efficacy, flexibility, consciousness, craftsmanship, and interdependence (Costa & Garmston, 1989, 2002). Since these are hard to quantify, self-reporting is a primary way of gathering data. When groups generate baseline data on these energy sources and then set goals and action plans, they experience tremendous payoffs.

Jane Ellison and Carolee Hayes, co-directors of the Center for Cognitive Coaching, developed a survey to help teams assess themselves on these resources (Ellison & Hayes, 1999, pp. 291-295). The benefits occur, as with any self-assessment instrument, from what groups do with the data.

Readers are invited to develop their own ways to assess these energy sources, perhaps through reflective conversation, observations, or developing a survey. What follows are brief descriptions of each energy source, accompanied by sample survey statements from the Ellison/Hayes survey. Group members rate each item this way: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree.

**EFFICACY**

Efficacious groups believe they have the capacity to make a difference and will work to do so. Efficacy is catalytic, often influencing other energy sources. Efficacy is a determining factor in resolving complex problems. Efficacious groups assign causality for student learning to factors they can do the most about — the conditions of teaching and learning at the school. When groups feel little efficacy, they assign causality to factors over which they have little control, such as students’ socioeconomic status. Groups with robust efficacy are likely to expend more energy, persevere longer, set more challenging goals, produce more learning, and continue in the face of failure.

Group members rate each item as either SA, A, D, or
Sample statements are:
• Our work has the effect we want it to have.
• Our team has control over what happens to us.

FLEXIBILITY

As groups develop cognitively, they value and more consistently view situations from multiple perspectives. Flexibility allows groups to see themselves and others from a holistic perspective, thus encouraging less “them” and “us” thinking. Flexibility is the internal resource for empathy, creative problem solving, and humor.

High-performing groups use both analytic and intuitive thinking. They pay attention through two lenses, micro and macro. Micro attention involves logical analytical reasoning and seeing cause and effect in methodical steps. It encompasses attention to detail, precision, and orderly progressions. Micro attention is important in data analysis or curriculum planning. Macro attention is useful for discerning themes and patterns from assortments of information. It is intuitive, holistic, and conceptual. Macro thinking is good for (again) data analysis, bridging gaps, and enabling groups to perceive a pattern even when some pieces are missing.

Group members rate each item as either SA, A, D, or SD. Sample statements are:
• We view situations through our own eyes and through the eyes of others.
• We consider several ways of doing something before deciding what might work best.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Without consciousness, groups are doomed to repeat actions that did not work. Consciousness, like efficacy, is particularly catalytic. Consciousness is a prerequisite for self-control and self-direction. Groups using this energy source decide where to focus. They may choose to maintain awareness of their values and norms, monitor the congruence between espoused beliefs and behavior, or stand outside themselves to reflect on their processes and products. Groups with high consciousness maintain awareness of their criteria for decision making.

Group members rate each item as either SA, A, D, or SD. Sample statements are:
• We consider the impact of our work and our decisions before we act.
• We pay attention to group processes.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Groups with craftsmanship invest energy in honing skills. Craftsmanship is the drive for elaboration, clarity, refinement, and precision. This is the energy source from which people learn and deepen their knowledge, skills, and effectiveness. Interestingly, schools that exhibit high craftsmanship often have staff members who are dissatisfied even with the good results of their work, because those educators know they can do better.

Groups accessing this resource invent better ways to do their work, honor in themselves and others the arduous journey of moving from novice to expert, manage time effectively, and continuously improve inter- and intragroup communications.

Group members rate each item as either SA, A, D, or SD. Sample statements are:
• We are good at predicting and managing time.
• We calibrate our progress against established criteria for excellence.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Interdependent groups use multiple webs of connections both with other groups, members of other groups and with members in their own group. Interdependence includes bonding to common goals, shared values, and shared conceptions of being. This is a valuable energy source for vertical teams, cross-discipline groups, schools, grade levels, or departments. Interdependent groups know that individuality is not lost as people connect with the group; only egocentricity will be eliminated.

Interdependence is a primary source for developing unique solutions to perplexing problems.

Group members rate each item as either SA, A, D, or SD. Sample statements are:
• We coordinate our goals with the goals of the organization.
• We seek support and give feedback to each other.

Like attitude, these energy sources cannot be taught. But once groups are aware of them, they can develop these traits. No single energy source is the key to high performance, but these energies act in concert with one another.

WHAT TO DO WITH SURVEY DATA

Once the group has gathered data on the five energy sources, members face the dilemma of how to use the data. The answer is threefold: analyze, focus, and set goals. For example, a grade-level group using its survey data decided to focus on consciousness after analyzing the data. They generated behavioral examples about consciousness in group interactions. They decided that members’ awareness of their own behavior in the moment, or having someone call the group’s attention to being off topic, or inviting a silent member to contribute, all were examples of consciousness. They felt that interrupting one another, being unresponsive to a person’s comment, putting an idea on
School improvement connects with whole-system change

Review by Francis M. Duffy

Ever since John Goodlad proclaimed in 1984 that the unit of change for school improvement was located in individual schools, school-based improvement has been and continues to be the dominant approach to improving schooling. That approach is important and it must continue, but, by itself, it is insufficient for improving education throughout entire school districts. Steven Jay Gross seems to recognize this assertion in his book, Promises Kept: Sustaining School and District Leadership in a Turbulent Era.

Although Gross’s book primarily offers advice, guidance, and tools for creating and sustaining school-based improvement, he repeatedly anchors that approach to improvement within the context of a school system. His most powerful argument in favor of anchoring school-based improvement to district-level reform is found in Chapter 10, where he talks specifically about how school-based improvement becomes very effective when it happens within the context of whole-system change. He provides a case study about district support for reform in the Paragould, Ark., school district (p. 115). Gross provides the rationale for a focus on district-level reform when he says, “Although the accounts of innovative schools in this book so far have centered on life at the school level, it is obvious that these institutions do not live in a vacuum. … All the reforming schools I visited are public and thus must relate somehow to larger organizational demands” (p. 114).

A significant characteristic of the book is Gross’ offering of tools and worksheets that practitioners can use to engage schools in innovative change. The book offers many. Another characteristic is the use of case studies — some real, some fictional composites formed from Gross’ experience with schools. These tools and case studies could easily be used to scale up school improvement from an individual school to create and sustain reform throughout a system.

As an advocate for whole-system reform within school districts, I am often dismayed by the preponderance of books and articles on school-based improvement that either intentionally or unintentionally disconnect school-based improvement from whole-district reform. The literature on organizational change is very, very clear that piecemeal approaches to change cannot and never will create whole-system improvement. School-based improvement that is not part of a districtwide reform (i.e., whole system reform) is a piecemeal approach to improving schooling. To create and sustain significant improvements in school performance, reform efforts must be anchored to districtwide reform.

Gross’ book offers readers a well-reasoned, well-written, and immensely practical argument supporting this contention. I highly recommend this book to staff development specialists who believe in the need for whole-district reform while preserving and honoring the tradition of school-based improvement.

Francis M. Duffy is a professor of change leadership in education at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. You can contact him at fmduffy@earthlink.net.

group wise / ROBERT J. GARMSTON

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the table unrelated to a current idea, and being late to meetings were examples of low consciousness. They monitored themselves in two ways. In one form, at the end of a meeting, members would talk about how they felt the group did on consciousness and give examples. In another form, they periodically paused in their meeting for two processing questions on which each person reflected privately and then shared his or her response with the group.

Leaders focus and help groups develop skills. When leaders also help groups attend to these energy sources while focusing on what groups talk about, groups improve how they talk and develop capacity for skilled conversations regarding the what of the conversations.

REFERENCES


