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Collaboration needs resolution skills

When the world-renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has," she was forecasting the single most powerful strategy for addressing challenges within a community. Today, NSDC is committed to this approach to re-energize schools, honor the expertise of professionals within those schools, tap the talents of educators, refine and align professional practice to standards, and ultimately improve results for students. Yet, commitment and thoughtfulness alone are insufficient to produce what Mead describes. It takes skillfulness in collaboration.

When people gather to learn and work together, hidden dynamics help or hinder the process. These dynamics involve how well people collaborate. We take for granted the remarkable expertise needed for a group of individuals to work together as a team. We are repeatedly disappointed when the results of teamwork are divisiveness or mediocrity. We are equally awestruck when the results are more than could be imagined, the kind Mead describes.

Below the surface of any successful team is attention to developing a set of skills that members use to advance the success of the team. Collaboration skills involve clear, honest communication; decision making; giving and receiving feedback; team structures such as setting agreements or norms; problem solving; and most importantly, handling conflict. Teachers, often because they work independently within their classrooms, have few opportunities to practice and refine their collaboration skills. Interacting with their peers differs from interacting with students. The stakes are higher, the risks greater.

One skill set that distinguishes sophisticated teams from those that are less developed is conflict

Collaboration: Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

resolution. Conflict typically emerges when a team is making a decision about something that matters. Teacher leaders can move a team from a novice state to a more advanced state by assisting teams with developing constructive strategies for addressing conflict. Strategies require developing a common knowledge base, surfacing assumptions members hold about conflict, establishing and applying a process that is explicit, and practicing skills related to open and honest communication.

Conflict is either constructive or destructive within a team. What determines how conflict affects a team is the skillfulness and attitudes of team members. When members believe conflict is bad and feel uncomfortable acknowledging it or inadequate addressing it, they will strive overtly or covertly to suppress it. Neither is healthy for the individual nor team.

Conflict emerges about insignificant and significant issues. One team member arriving repeatedly late can become a burr in the team's effective-

ness when left unaddressed. Forgetting to bring the promised treats might seem benign, yet it may become the unspoken reason for distrust. Conflict, if a team is working on what matters to them, is inevitable. To take on weighty issues and work through them when differences in beliefs exist is the hallmark of a highly successful team. Teacher leaders can create safe places for people to air differences, focus on the topics, and surface assumptions that keep people at odds.

Before teams find themselves in conflict, it is helpful for them to explore their beliefs about conflict and develop a strategy for addressing it. One way to do that is to share the messages they received about conflict when they were younger. These messages give team members insights into each other's views of conflict. For example, in my large family, the common message we received as children was, "Don't fight." This message suggests that disagreements were inappropriate, so I learned to leave them unspoken. That strategy worked for a while until the baggage of unspoken disagreements spilled over and I erupted in what seemed like inappropriate ways for the matter at hand. What drove my actions was rarely the matter at hand, and most often a long history of unspoken disagreements.

Others too have messages from their past that drive their views of conflict. It was not until I became a young adult that I realized that conflict was healthy. I acquired strategies for addressing conflict. While I continued to harbor some fear about conflict, the strategies and opportunities to practice gave me courage to understand differences when they occurred. Eventually the fear was replaced with appreciation.

Team members' ability to address conflict is entangled with their experiences with conflict, their skillfulness and clear strategies for addressing conflict, and their commitment to the team's goal. Exploring team members' assumptions about conflict is more than an exercise in self-disclosure designed to help team members know each other better at the belief or value level; it is a concrete

step toward creating a constructive approach to resolve conflict when it arises.

To create an appreciation for conflict and to handle it constructively rather than destructively, team facilitators might open the door for dialogue about team members' views about conflict. In this form of interaction, members withhold judgment or the need to reach agreement in order to seek understanding.

The outcome of dialogue is not action, but rather appreciation. In dialogue everyone has a voice and is encouraged to speak openly and honestly. Those listening are asked to receive their colleagues' comments without judgment, rebuttal, contradiction, or agreement. They are asked to speak in sentences that describe their own thinking about the topic rather than to agree or disagree with what someone else is saying. For example rather than saying, "I agree with you," or "I disagree with what you are saying," members are encouraged to say, "Your comments lead me to think about . . ." or "As I listen to you, I find myself wondering if . . ." or "The idea about _____ has me thinking that ..."

When team members gain a deeper understanding of how they individually view conflict, they can leave dialogue and move to discussion to consider how to work together to address conflict. One strategy is to consider conflict like a problem and apply a creative problem-solving process. The criteria for selecting a solution for the identified problem are generated from the team's goals and the collected interests of team members rather than the desires of one member.

Taking time to focus on how a team addresses conflict before conflict arises can dramatically accelerate a team's effectiveness. To support teams in becoming highly productive, teacher leaders facilitate dialogue and discussion about conflict before conflict becomes debilitating. When teams learn to address conflict constructively, they will learn too to appreciate what they are able to accomplish as a team that no one individual is able to achieve alone. ◆

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