Preparing the ground for growth

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Does the creation of learning teams automatically mean that teachers will use – or even possess -- the skills necessary to work well within those teams? The answer for one elementary principal was a definite no. His district began developing learning communities by creating grade-level learning teams. Some teams jumped in, worked productively, and accomplished amazing results while having fun. Other teams struggled. One team leader, for example, refused to discuss any alternatives to her ideas, leaving other team members to describe the team's leadership as a "my way or the highway" approach.

After this shaky start, the principal developed a series of learning activities to help teachers understand what collaboration looks like and sounds like. Given the importance of collaborative professional learning, all principals will need to follow this route and **assist teachers in learning how to work successfully with colleagues** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 95). There are a number of issues for principals to consider.

First, the principal will need to assist teachers to **use trust-building skills** in their learning teams. "Trust is the foundation for productive interpersonal relationships… Building trust sets the stage for open communication, collaboration, and engagement" (Parsley, 2009, p.4). Building and using **group decision-making skills** is another learning focus. In the past, teachers have been expected to make curricular, instructional, and classroom management decisions quickly **and** independently. A highly productive learning team needs to make joint decisions concerning collaborative actions.

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

School-based staff should learn about the stages of **group development**. Research identified that teams move through four stages of development: **Forming** (testing)**, Storming** (infighting), **Norming** (getting organized), and **Performing** (mature closeness). The progression through each of these stages is not inevitable—in other words, teams can get stuck in a stage unless they possess the skills to resolve the issues inherent in that stage. Principals could ask team members to assess their current stage and use the results to determine next steps (Richardson, 2005, p.5-7).

A productive team isn't necessarily conflict free. Effective teams *will* have disagreements and conflicts. Team members need to know how to manage those disagreements through the use of effective **conflict resolution skills**. The conflict will involve both disagreements over ideas as well as interpersonal differences. Tackling conflict directly, sometimes called the Storming stage of group development, is one step that teams will need to learn in order to become highly productive (Jolly, 2009).

Teams should also establish norms of operation. Norms establish how teams desire to work together. Norms should focus on collaborative interactions such as listening as an ally or paraphrasing. Teams can check their own development by routinely debriefing their use of these norms throughout the school year.

Building collaborative skills is like preparing the garden for seedlings—effective professional learning thrives when collaborative skills have been laid as groundwork first.

> **Learn more about NSDC's standards:**
> www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm

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