

theme COLLABORATION

A TUNE-UP *for* STYMIED TEAMS

**WHEN A GROUP'S FOCUS FALTERS,
TAKE STEPS TO GET BACK ON TRACK**

By Renee Hesson

By spring break, the common thread that bound together the team of middle school teachers with whom I worked as a professional development coach and planning team facilitator was unraveling at a rapid pace. The team's students had presented to my colleagues a series of learning and behavioral challenges. When these challenges were added to daily managerial and instructional tasks, the once-motivated group was now creatively stymied. Our common planning time lacked instructional focus, and enthusiasm for this important work was flagging.

As coach, my role is to foster collaboration among the team's grade-level teachers during common planning time

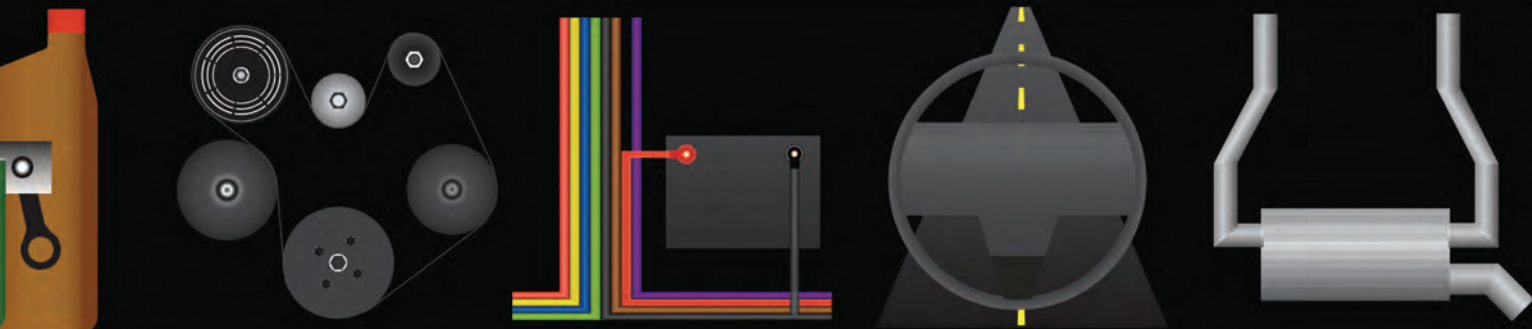


The keys to refocusing a committed team on the instructional goals originally established by the group are through reality, relationships, and reflection, coach Renee Hesson says.

and encourage the team's use of a learning cycle in which collaborative teams analyze student achievement data from multiple sources to create a specific action plan to address the gaps in students' understanding. This approach requires teacher teams to examine student performance on one or more indicators to determine what misunderstandings have occurred, which students are impacted by the disparity, why one or more teaching strategies may not have worked, and how to approach teaching the same material in a manner to reach all students.

Now that the year was well under way, the group's focus had begun to falter. Though team members were aware of the dysfunction and committed to improve, they were unclear how to proceed in a way that would benefit students.

After examining why the team's progress had stalled,



I soon zeroed in on three key components that would get the wayward team on track: reality, relationships, and reflection. Focusing on these components soon increased the group's productivity. My experience demonstrates that the team member who assumes the role of facilitator may successfully maximize a team's on-task behavior by focusing on these key components.

Even the most efficient team of teachers can become ineffective. Conversely, even the most ineffective team can be made more efficient and productive. The keys to refocusing a committed team on the instructional goals originally established by the group are through reality, relationships, and reflection. These critical components of effective collaboration guide a renewed commitment to assist students to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Using these components, collaborative teams assess current reality, establish committed relationships, and conduct a thorough reflection to promote positive change. These steps can be applied independently or successively as needed to most collaborative team situations and will help establish, enhance, or engage a team in a collaborative culture, inclusive of any professional learning team, any task, and any time of the school year.

ASSESS CURRENT REALITY

The team's first step is to conduct a thorough assessment of current reality to establish need and set timely goals for student learning. Although team members may think they know the current reality of students' understanding of a topic or skill, the facilitator must guide the team to move beyond anecdotal evidence to determine a student-centered plan of action.

To accomplish this, the team synthesizes results from multiple available data sources and analyzes student work samples. Data can include state and district assessment re-

sults and formal classroom assessments. The team should also document trend data to analyze growth or lack of growth toward student achievement targets over time. Because student feedback and perceptions are as important as their achievement output, the team should also administer one or more informal student surveys to monitor student satisfaction with teachers' expectations and instructional practices.

Evidence from multiple traditional and nontraditional data sources clearly illustrates the instructional challenges that need to be addressed before the end of the year. A group of teaching professionals who engage actively in setting student learning goals will be more likely to sustain momentum through the final weeks of school planning to achieve these outcomes.

Through a detailed root cause analysis, team members dissect achievement data to determine what is and what is not working instructionally for students. This information can be used to establish a plan of action to develop student groups or to provide remediation or enrichment opportunities.

ESTABLISH COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS

The second component, relationships, is related to a needs-based assessment and action plan development. However, this component respects the need to examine both team dynamics and established member roles to reinforce a culture of sharing in a climate of change for the purpose of growth. Team members must feel supported throughout the process and encouraged to equally contrib-

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ute their time, effort, and ideas that are closely aligned to team goals and student learning objectives.

Relationships are important, and team-building exercises strengthen existing working relationships. Prompt team members to reflect on and share honest feedback by stating their thoughts, feelings, and professional opinions through a time of uncertainty and redirection.

The facilitator begins this exercise by writing “I can live with/I cannot live without” statements. For example, the facilitator might write, “I can live with silence during the time the team needs to process new information. I’ve been uncomfortable with the long silences, but I need to stop interjecting while others are still trying to grapple with the information.” Another statement might read, “I cannot live without adhering to the set agenda. Too often, the team is engaging in off-topic talk, and I feel like a lot of time is wasted when we do that.”

Individual team members then complete these statements to share with the rest of the group. Additionally, the group may include more personalized feedback to each team member by completing this statement: “When you contributed X to this team, I found it helpful because ...” The sharing can be anonymous, but the team needs to ensure that anonymous sharing remains constructive and positive and does not single out one team member as weak or wrong.

The facilitator assists team members as they re-establish commitments and build trust in each other that the team will firmly adhere to the new student learning outcomes. Regardless of the process, the desired result should initiate a group’s progress toward true collaboration.

CONDUCT A THOROUGH REFLECTION

The practices of examining current reality and building pro-

fessional relationships lend themselves to the third component of collaboration — reflection. In this component, the team revisits established team norms and the administration’s expectations for the team’s use of the collaborative time. Additionally, the team updates the timeline of team tasks to reflect accomplishments.

Reflection also examines areas of challenge, including unfinished tasks. The facilitator prompts team members to question time on task and to identify factors that impede or inhibit progress. At this point, the team may elect to modify existing practice to reflect this critical evaluation. Once refined, the team’s collaborative process will more closely align with its desired levels of productivity.

The reward of working as a team of teachers on behalf of students outweighs the risk of critically evaluating the team’s process and products. Reflection renews and refocuses the team’s creative energy and aligns the group’s strategic efforts to achieve common goals.

BUILD CAPACITY TO SERVE STUDENTS

The components of reality, relationships, and reflection lead to a focused effort to control the quality of a group’s output through the end of the school year. Using these components, the facilitator builds the team’s capacity to use its time constructively and with a common purpose. Led by a facilitator, the collaborative team examines current reality, builds relationships, and evaluates progress to adjust the team’s practices to best serve students as a functional group year-round.

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All aboard!

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from not always having the learning target clearly identified or visible to clearly identifying what students are to know and be able to do and being visible in the classroom.”

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