TURN OBSTACLES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

TEAM LEADERS USE A SKILLFUL APPROACH TO MOVE PAST BARRIERS TO LEARNING

By Elisa B. MacDonald

Three weeks into my first year as a teacher, I am standing in the hallway at dismissal when the director of instruction gently approaches me and says, "Elisa, the principal wondered if you could lead your team's meeting."

"Today?" I ask, slightly panicked that the meeting starts in 15 minutes, and I have never led a team of adults before, let alone five colleagues with more experience than me.

He musters up his best smile and says, "For the year." He adds, "Just put a couple things down on paper as the agenda and try to get people to stick to it. You'll be fine."

My entry point into team leadership is what I call an instant coffee approach: Start with a group. Just add leader. And, as you might imagine, this approach yielded as much richness as, well, instant coffee. I am so grateful to the first team of teachers that I led, but I would hardly call what I did leading learning for student achievement.

Since that fall day in 1995, I have had numerous op-portunities to develop my capacity to lead teams and coach others to do so. These experiences have led me to appreciate the craftsmanship of leading a team of adults. The well-intentioned advice from my administrator to write an agenda and try to stick to it does not begin to prepare a team leader for the complexity of leading colleagues in learning. Regardless of who is leading or being led, every team seeking to improve student achievement comes up against hurdles. These hurdles generate distinct dilemmas for a team leader.

For instance, a team leader might succeed in getting

Author and teacher leader developer Elisa B. MacDonald says she has come to appreciate the craftsmanship of leading a team of adults.

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teachers to regularly look at student work together, but can't get the conversation past blaming others and focused on examining root causes and solutions. This presents the team leader with a dilemma: How do I lead our team in rigorous discourse when blame and excuses dominate talk?

Or a team leader may find she is able to foster rigorous discourse, but her team gets stuck at implementation in the classroom, leaving her to wonder: How do I lead an action-oriented team when intentions don't align with classroom practice?

Team hurdles often crop up because of what is going on inside the team, but outside factors contribute as well. School leadership, for example, can help or hinder a team's learning and impact on students. For instance, a team leader may be designated to lead a team, but when the principal is still making all of the team's learning decisions, the team leader is faced with a dilemma: How do I foster shared leadership for learning when no one has authority to lead (including me)?

I have learned that no matter how much experience a team leader has, she is likely to be confronted with team hurdles, creating a dilemma of what to do. What distinguishes the skillful team leader from a less-effective leader is her approach to overcome these hurdles. This approach is rooted in the leader's values, mindset, intelligence, and skill.

THE SKILLFUL LEADER'S APPROACH
Values

Values provide guidance for the work teams do. They ground a team leader in what is important. They remind a team leader of what matters. When faced with hurdles to team learning, the skillful team leader relies on her strong commitment to five foundational values: collaboration, shared leadership, goal setting and attainment, rigorous discourse, and continuous improvement.

To anyone versed in professional learning community literature, this list should sound familiar — perhaps so familiar that the meaning is watered down. The skillful team leader has an elevated, nuanced

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understanding of these five foundational values, and she fully commits to putting them into practice. Here is what each value looks like.

Collaboration. The skillful team leader believes learning together yields better results than does working alone. She is not satisfied with a group that meets regularly and calls itself a team when the members neither learn from one another nor advance student learning. She continuously assesses and advances the team's function (how they work interdependently) and impact on student learning (what they are working on and the outcomes achieved).

Shared leadership. The skillful team leader does not simply share leadership within the team by rotating roles of facilitator, notetaker, timekeeper, and the like. Instead, he insists that team members share the lead for each other's learning, including his own.

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Goal setting and attainment. The skillful team leader does not set and implement team goals out of compliance but works diligently with the team to attain goals that deeply matter to teachers, students, and the school. Driven by purpose, the team leader advances the team through the inquiry cycle to achieve measured gains for students.

Rigorous discourse. The skillful team leader does not settle for team discourse that promotes more of the same talk and practice, but gently and purposefully prods the team to engage in evidence-based discourse that challenges cultural assumptions held by leaders, teachers, and students so that actionable knowledge is gained.

Continuous improvement. The skillful team leader is not satisfied with team learning that doesn't result in replicable, long-lasting change.

THE SKILLFUL TEAM LEADER
By Elisa MacDonald

This book is an essential resource for team leaders and trainers of team leaders. The author offers a skillful approach to team leadership rooted in values, mindset, intelligence, and skill. Reality-based examples illustrate common team hurdles in collaboration, shared leadership, goal setting and attainment, rigorous discourse, and continuous improvement.
Available in the Learning Forward Bookstore, **www.learningforward. org/bookstore or 800-727-7288.**
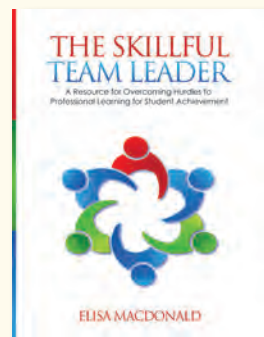
Mindset

What a teacher believes in his core about every student's capacity to learn impacts his effectiveness in the classroom. What a team leader believes in her core about every teacher's capacity to learn and improve impacts her effectiveness in leading a team.

Carol Dweck's (2006) research highlights the distinctions between fixed and growth mindsets and the impact each has on an individual's effort and success. Applied to leadership, the skillful team leader approaches hurdles from a growth mindset with a belief that every student and every teacher can improve as can her own ability to lead them. Being able to recognize both a teacher's mindset and one's own is a necessary skill for any team leader to facilitate ongoing learning. Being able to influence mindset brings about desired change.

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Similarly, I didn't feel confident in respectfully challenging teachers who were considered outstanding. I believed they had nothing more to learn and would balk at anything our team or I suggested. In addition, I mistook some teachers' concerns about changing as an indication that they were just being resistant.

Even as a teacher, I possessed a fixed mindset about my own abilities, sometimes quick to challenge my team leader when asked to implement something I didn't think I could do.

With conscious effort, my mindset changed. As a teacher, I listened and learned from my colleagues, hearing their growth mindset about students — going all out to ensure that their students learned. I followed suit with my classes and ultimately realized that the adults I lead are learners, too, needing the right conditions for growth. I learned to view failure differently. Teachers who fail are not failures.

As a team leader, I worked with teachers who at first were reluctant to make changes to their practice and later became champions of the change. I noticed that when I responded differently to someone who had a fixed mindset about his own teaching, his mindset and actions began to shift.

Instead of dismissing someone who showed resistance, I believed in his abilities, came to understand his concerns, and followed through with action. When he began to achieve, he began to believe. I learned that my mindset about the capacity of others to learn influenced how much they learned.

Intelligence

The intelligence with which the skillful team leader approaches her work is not IQ but EQ, emotional intelligence. A term coined by Daniel Goleman (2002), *emotional intelligence* is one's ability to be attuned to and respond to emotions in self and others.

Skillful team leaders access "a potent emotional guidance system that keeps what they say and do on track. … They listen carefully, picking up on what people are truly concerned about, and they respond on the mark" (p. 50).

Jack London's (1916) description of surfing in his short story, "The Kanaka Surf," seems a perfect metaphor for the emotional intelligence the skillful team leader exhibits. He wrote that, "[It] requires wisdom of waves, timing of waves, and a trained deftness in entering such unstable depths of water with pretty, unapprehensive, head-first cleavage, while at the same time making the shallowest possible of dives" (para. 39).

Like the surfer, the skillful team leader possesses wisdom, timing, and deftness as she navigates the hurdle-filled waters of leading a team. She is highly attuned to the emotions of the group and is aware of how her own emotional response can impact others. She manages these emotions with skill.

When I began leading my colleagues, I found that being attuned to others' emotions came naturally. Years of teaching and needing to be aware of every student in the room at all times helps develop this. But where I quickly realized I needed growth was in regulating my own emotions and responding to others. To read and respond effectively to the emotional climate that a hurdle creates, and to avoid inadvertently creating a new hurdle, requires skill.

Skill

When face-to-face with a hurdle, the skillful team leader is able to:

Identify the hurdle. Like pausing a movie at a critical point, the skillful team leader can detect a hurdle when it is almost unnoticeable to anyone else on the team. He recognizes when a team encounters an obstacle to learning and consciously proceeds to uncover where it is coming from.

Explore possible causes. The skillful team leader does not react to a hurdle but instead thoughtfully analyzes it as if looking through a telephoto lens of a digital video camera. She is able to zoom in to causes found at the team level and then zoom out to see causes posed by her own leadership and the school.

Respond. After careful analysis of possible contributing factors to the hurdle, the skillful team leader thoughtfully considers her options for response. She not only decides which responses to use but also when to use them. She makes use of four types of responses:

- **Proactive response.** What the team leader says and does can often prevent the team from coming up against the hurdle in the first place. For example, a common proactive response used is norming, also known as crafting a group agreement. Successful teams not only norm for function (e.g. "We will agree to disagree") but they also norm for impact on teacher and student learning (e.g. "We will invite others to question our assumptions, beliefs, and values").

- **In-the-moment response.** The skillful team leader makes the decision to respond to what is happening as it is happening. For example, a team leader faced with the hurdle of getting others on his team to lead can find an entry point and invite leadership. He listens for moments when someone expresses interest to lead and creates an opportunity. If a teacher recommends a successful strategy to others, the team leader can press gently by asking, "Would you be willing to bring in the resource that gave you that strategy?"

- **Follow-up response.** The skillful team leader's words and actions after a meeting ensure that the team is able to sustain gains made without creating another hurdle to learning. For instance, the leader may use a check-in strategy, where a team assesses how well they function and the impact they have on student learning.

- **School leadership team response.** The skillful team leader mobilizes others, particularly the principal and administrators, in helping her team move beyond a given hurdle. Tony Wagner et al. (2006) suggest districts form "leadership practice communities" where leaders commit to "helping one another solve problems of practice related to the school's teaching and learning challenges together" (p. 17).

- **Consider school culture.** The skillful team leader views hurdles as obstacles to overcome but also as windows into the complex world of school culture. Often described as "the way we do things around here," school culture is full of beliefs, values, customs, and traditions that suggest how people have interacted in the past and are the basis for how they interact in the present (and likely will in the future unless deep-rooted change is made). Schools that don't address the deeper cultural issues at hand only go through the motions of being a professional learning community, and they will struggle to achieve sustainable student improvement (Fullan, 2008). The skillful team leader knows that addressing a problem specific to her team without a deep look at how school culture contributes will only give rise to the hurdle again. For a team leader, this means considering not only causes from within the team but also looking for signs of a gap in school culture. Based on Edgar H. Schein's work, this culture gap is when an espoused value doesn't align with visible evidence in the organization (as cited in Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, &

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The RAND report stresses that when districts build time into the schedule (and extra pay into the budget) for teachers to set up their classrooms before the program begins, they are able to make better use of instructional time from the outset. And teachers themselves say they want to make sure they have all the resources they need ready to go when their students walk through the door.

Augustine and her colleagues saw the difference the extra time could make: "When we walk into a classroom where teachers have had a day or two to set it up, there is all sorts of big butcher block paper taped around the room that has reminders for students on math procedures or reading tips," she says. "When teachers don't have that time, the classroom certainly doesn't look as visually appealing, but it also doesn't have those visual cues for learning. … Teachers tell us they want those visual cues."

READY, SET, SUMMER

By making the decision to start early, recruit the best teachers available, and give them the professional learning, support, and time they need to do their job well, districts can set the stage for a fruitful summer. And keeping students on task between school years can begin to bridge the achievement gap.

Look out your window. Is that snow on the ground? Time to get to work on summer learning.

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Smith, 1994, pp. 268-269). The school may have a healthy culture otherwise, but a gap creates a hurdle that teams have trouble moving past.

For example, a team struggling to collaborate might be due to the fact that the group is still forming and not comfortable sharing instructional challenges and successes. The skillful team leader also considers the possibility of a "culture of alone together," where people are teamed together but act alone. They are guarded in what they share and with whom, seeing collaboration as only necessary for people who need help and preferring to work in isolation.

Teams that are content to be pockets of success in a system where school culture gaps go unaddressed find themselves struggling to sustain the positive impact they have. It's as if the team is working hard to knit a beautiful sweater while someone is on the other end unraveling the yarn. The skillful team leader not only works with her team to navigate around the hurdles that school culture gaps cause, but also works to close those gaps so all teams can succeed.

STILL EMERGING

Years of listening to team leaders' dilemmas and reflecting on my own, of mulling over moments when my response succeeded in overcoming a hurdle to team learning or unintentionally created another, and of searching for practical solutions grounded in theory and research have led me to believe that although hurdles can seem impossible to move past, they can, in fact, be catalysts for greater learning when approached skillfully.

With each hurdle I encounter, I better understand the complexity of leading. I learn how to anticipate and avoid; I learn how to effectively respond. And although I suppose my years of experience might categorize me beyond an emerging leader, I know I still have a lot to learn.

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