PLEASE DO DISTURB: 3 WAYS TO STIR UP GROUPS AND INCREASE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

"Natural systems cannot be directed, only disturbed."
— *Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, 1987*

Collaborative teams, much like weather systems and national economies, are composed of independent but interrelated elements making up a whole. They are organized by nonlinear feedback mechanisms that are continuously responding to other elements in the system. Understanding their dynamics is not possible using linear logic; instead, we need to use sophisticated nonlinear mathematical models (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

Maturana and Varela (1987) tell us that systems choose what to notice and how to pay attention. This column will explore three disturbances educators can create in order to increase effectiveness as well as the ways systems — that is, collaborative teams — typically attend and respond. We will focus on adopting norms of collaboration, broadening perspectives of planners, and naming elephants.

NORMS OF COLLABORATION

In our experience working with groups, we have often witnessed moments when group members begin to inquire into others' ideas. Almost magically, the meeting tenor changes, participants show and feel more respect, and the quality of work improves. When group members begin to paraphrase others as a way to clarify their understanding of ideas, the practice spreads, and relationships and work quality improve.

In each case, group members have disturbed habitual patterns of communication, setting in motion two principles of nonlinear systems: Everything affects everything else, and tiny events cause major disturbances.

One way groups create these changes is by adopting the seven norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman,

COMMUNICATION RATIOS
High-, medium-, and low-performing teams

Success levels	Positive to negative	Inquiry to advocacy	Talking about self to talking about others
High-performing	5.8 to 1	1 to 1	1 to 1
Medium-performing	1.8 to 1	2 to 3	2 to 3
Low-performing	1 to 30	1 to 3	1 to 30

2009). The norms are based on deceptively simple skills: Pausing, paraphrasing, inquiring, probing, putting ideas on the table, paying attention to self and others, and presuming positive intention. These skills become norms when they become habits. This requires focus, mindfulness, and perseverance.

To integrate these norms into your working groups, begin by sharing a rationale for using this practice. Describe how the norms improve productivity. Then have groups assess their use of the norms and select which might be the most productive starting place. Inventories and instructions can be downloaded from **www.adaptiveschools.com**.

Why do the norms make such a difference for teams? In a study of 60 business teams, Losada and Heaphy (2004) sought to understand how communication practices and emotional dynamics influenced performance levels. (See chart below.) They studied three variables: positive and negative team communications; inquiry and advocacy; and talking about self as contrasted with talking about others. Teams were rated as high, medium, or low based on sales, customer satisfaction, and observations/interviews by superiors.

Interactions were coded as positive if support, encouragement, or appreciation was present and coded negative for disapproval, sarcasm, or cynicism.

In high-performing teams, the ratio of positive to negative was 5.8 to 1. The ratio for the low-performing teams was an astonishing 1 to 20. High-performing teams balanced inquiry and advocacy, while the low-performing teams advocated more than inquired (3 to 1).

As time went on, high-performing teams flourished and became even more effective, creative, and adaptive.

DISTURBING PERCEPTIONS

In a planning tool David Hyerle (2000) calls a circle map, groups move beyond the boundaries of their perceptions. In this strategy, a group brainstorms what comes to

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mind as they think about an initiative. They record ideas within a large circle on chart paper using only one color of marker. Members then consider who is not in the room but has a stake in the initiative. The members select one group of stakeholders and brainstorm from their perspective. The group records ideas from the phantom groups on the chart with a different color pen.

Invariably, this illuminates previously unconsidered dimensions of the initiative and provides data for more creative and inclusive planning.

We observed this in action when a group of teachers serving a low socioeconomic community were planning an after-school program. They reflected on what they had in common and were surprised to notice that each was female, white, middle class, middle-aged, with college educations. They went back to the drawing board seeking perspectives they did not have.

NAME THE ELEPHANTS

When groups hold perceptions that they aren't comfortable expressing to one another or to their superiors, their capacity to work together productively is limited. Leaders often think a group is operating more democratically than do the members. Group members may hold perceptions that leaders and other group members don't know about.

Naming the "elephant in the boardroom" disturbs a system of unstated agreement not to talk about that which is hard to talk about. Given sound facilitation and reasonable group member skills, talking about uncomfortable

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Problems to be solved:
- Intimidator on team;
- Working around intimidating employees (secretary, custodian, etc.);
- One individual with negative attitude;
- Working around an inadequate employee.

Polarities to be managed:
- Novice versus experienced staff members;
- Working within district systems that need fixing.

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issues releases tensions and creates productive interactions and better ways of working.

Use an "elephant walk" to surface hidden perceptions. Share the metaphor of the elephant in the boardroom. Tell a group that you imagine there may be elephants in this room. Instruct members to rise, walk about interacting with others, and ask what elephants they might be aware of.

Design a safe way of reporting. Table groups can list what they've learned. They select the three most important, and write them on sentence strips. They post the strips on the wall. The elephants are now explicitly stated for all to see and are easier to address than complaints.

Teams often harbor unstated tensions. If these tensions are voiced at all, it is usually in the parking lot. When groups identify possible unstated complaints, they can address the tensions and improve group performance and satisfaction. In recent work with an urban school district, we asked what elephants might be operating within school site councils. We discovered that some elephants represented problems to solve, and others polarities to manage (Garmston, 2008). See box below.

Problems invite groups to gather data, determine a desired state, and develop a plan. In the case of a member with a negative attitude, or an intimidator within the group, the group is allowing the situation to persist. Members must openly identify the counterproductive behavior, be explicit about the effects on the group, and assign responsibilities about being both proactive and reactive regarding the troubling behavior.

Polarities, however, are chronic, ongoing tensions that are inherent in individual and organizational systems. They are unavoidable and unsolvable and must be managed by both/and thinking. We've encountered various unstated tensions between novice and experienced staff members. In some settings, new teachers feel hesitant to speak up in meetings for fear their tenure will be threatened. This may be unfounded, but until the perception is raised and explored, the perception will drive the reality of staff communications.

There will always be tension between site processes and district programs or policies. Teams must seek to use the best of both systems and reduce the negative aspects.

An important insight that grew from the work with this urban district was that no one would eliminate wariness between unions and districts. Yet the goals of each are roughly the same — high student achievement and happy employees. An effective site-level team acknowledges these tensions and works within them.

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