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STRENGTHS-BASED FOCUS BUILDS TEAM COLLABORATION

The hallmark of an effective leadership team is members' ability to collaborate with each other in planning and implementing the steps to achieve the team's vision and objectives. When done well, this collaborative work facilitates the growth of each team member and a learning culture for the larger school community by tapping into the multiple perspectives present in the team.

Collective efficacy is a belief that the group has the power to achive its goals and is fed on evidence of this fact. Collective efficacy depends on members gaining an understanding of others' points of view, especially those that are different from our own, since most of us tend to solicit advice from people who think as we do. This article describes the characteristics of collective efficacy, the main elements needed to achieve it, and how to build on members' strengths to do so.

Essential elements for building collective efficacy include: developing a climate of respect among team members; using everyone's perspectives and experiences; having explicit ground rules that become part of the group's culture; having specific and clear individual responsibilities; ongoing monitoring of the work; stating any nonnegotiables up front; and testing assumptions of what the group has agreed upon before taking action.

Each of these can be fostered or hindered, depending on the focus of the team. Teams that focus on weakness tend to have low expectations for what they can accomplish, whereas teams that focus on and leverage strengths tend to have high expectations.

'I' SKILLS AND 'WE' SKILLS

"I" skills:

- A "just-right" level of self-confidence in my own ability to contribute to the group.
- Seeing myself as a learner.
- Setting group goals.
- Working together while following directions and delegating tasks.
- Identifying challenges and overcoming obstacles.
- Verbal communication skills (conflict resolution, negotiation, desirable argumentation).
- Nonverbal communication skills (eye contact, gestures, body language, facial expressions, tone).

"We" skills:

- Social sensitivity (empathy, acknowledging mistakes, accepting others).
- Potency.
- Motivation to tackle the task together.
- Ability to take turns.
- Flexibility in taking on roles within the group or team.
- Determination to succeed together.
- Collective responsibility for keeping going and meeting deadlines.
- A sense of group responsibility for each other as equal participants.
- Being able to give supportive feedback to each other without diminishing self-efficacy.

SUMMARY OF A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH	
What it is	• Values everyone equally and focuses on what the child can do rather than what the child cannot do. • Describes learning and development respectfully and honestly. • Builds on a child's abilities within their zones of proximal and potential development. • Acknowledges that people experience difficulties and challenges that need attention and support. • Identifies what is taking place when learning and development go well, so that it may be reproduced, further developed, and strengthened.
What it is not	• Focuses only on "positive" things. • Avoids the truth. • Accommodates bad behavior. • Fixates on problems. • Minimizes concerns. • Is one-sided. • Serves as a tool to label individuals.

Adapted from: **Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2012).** *Strengths-based approach: A guide to writing transition and learning and development statements* (p. 9). www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/learning/FINAL_Transition-Resource%20Kit_6.4-SBA-only-March-2019.pdf

FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS

Teachers and leaders often focus on deficits — "the perceived weaknesses of individuals or groups, such that the individuals or groups become viewed as 'the problem' " (Artze-Vega & Delgado, 2019). Leaders talk about what the teachers are not doing and lament the ways in which teaching and learning occur. Teachers focus on what students can't do and point to students' past experiences and families as contributing factors.

This focus is counterproductive. When educators — as individuals or as teams — focus on deficits, they lower their expectations for students and each other. In contrast, when teams focus on strengths, they are more likely to increase their expectations and focus on productive ways to build on the strengths. The table above provides a general summary of a strengths-based approach.

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO COLLABORATION

How do teams take a strengths-based approach in their collaborative planning? How do teams avoid the trap of deficit thinking and instead build on the strengths of their members and school communities?

A strengths-based approach in collaborative planning focuses on identifying and leveraging the individual strengths and skills of team members to enhance overall team performance and achieve common goals. By recognizing and using the unique abilities of individuals, teams can create more innovative solutions, improve problem-solving capabilities, and increase their collective impact.

To be effective on a team, people need to focus on their individual contributions and perspectives as well as the ways in which they work with others — in other words, to focus on both "I" skills and "We" skills (Hattie et al., 2021), as shown in the box on p. 16.

REFLECT ON YOUR TEAM'S COLLABORATIVE STRENGTHS

To build your team's strengths-based collaborative planning capacity, invite members to self-assess their skills and identify their strengths. You can use the "I" skills and "We" skills listed here as a starting place. Team members may also want to identify areas for future learning and growth.

Team members can share their strengths and identify areas in which they need to grow or recruit others to compliment them. When people are transparent with their skills and the team relies on those skills to get work done, better decisions and improved impact are more likely.

It takes an effective team, collaborating and building on strengths, to ensure that a school or district is successful. Such a collaborative team is built on the members' ability to see the whole team as more than the sum of its parts.

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