# Teacher teams that lead to student learning

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In many schools, teams come together primarily to plan events, build common assessments, or determine curriculum or grade-level planning. But teams often struggle to make teamwork an inquiry-driven process that focuses on problems of practice and student learning.

The essential focus of teams should be on building collective responsibility (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017). Research shows that teacher teams that make links to teaching practices are more effective when compared to teams with less intense forms of collaboration (Meirink et al., 2010).

In 2019, we collaborated with our colleague Robert Garmston on a book,

*Transforming Teamwork: Cultivating Collaborative Cultures*, which focused on this question: What essential conditions have the most leverage for transforming collaborative groups? We drew on seminal work about professional learning communities and team learning (e.g., Hord, 2008).

Over and over, we cycled back to three distinct but interrelated high-leverage processes: psychological safety, constructive conflict, and actionable learning. To stress the simultaneity of these processes, we wove them into a twisted spiral — a triple helix. This image makes explicit the synchronic interrelationship of three distinct drivers essential for high-performing, inquiry-driven teams.


## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Teams must create conditions for their members to feel safe so that they can ask for help and take risks. Psychological safety has four domains:

- **Trust in self:** Do I feel safe speaking my personal truths?
- **Trust in relationships:** Do I feel listened to and respected by my teammates?
- **Trust in process:** Does the team have processes (norms) for collaboration such as turn taking or seeking all voices?
- **Trust in collective learning:** Does our team activate cycles of inquiry exploring problems of practice that lead to increased student learning?

When any of these dimensions breaks down, teams tend to bog down.

Psychological safety is dependent on the degree of trust within a team. When teams regularly monitor the four dimensions of trust, they increase their psychological safety, capacity to self-monitor, and self-regulate (and co-regulate) to maintain and repair trust.

To foster psychological safety, teams must build in processes for self-reflection. While there are various survey tools on the internet or lists of norms for teams to adopt, we prefer a simple group process to facilitate the development of norms tailored for the group.

We start by asking participants to share what they *don't* like about meetings, and then we ask three to four participants to turn the "don't likes" into a group process agreement that captures a positive intention, such as, "Strive to have a balance of voices in the room" or "Check for understanding with summary statements."

This language of positive intentions offers solutions instead of criticisms and sustains psychological safety. For example, a single person can change the conversation by stating the intention with a request such as, "Time out. We need to balance voices in the room" or "We seem bogged down. Can someone give a summary of the key points on the floor?"

For this exercise to work, the norms must be treated as a living history and group reflections must be embedded into the agenda. It's important to remember that psychological safety is not something that can be fixed and then forgotten. It is a *forever* commitment for transforming teamwork (Garmston & Zimmerman, 2013).

## CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Conflict is an inevitable part of teamwork. The dilemma we all face when differences are expressed is staying open, neutral, curious, and interested. The ideal is to make our thoughts more available to diverse perspectives to better understand self and others. Margaret Wheatley, a thought leader and author, says, "Nothing living changes until it interprets things differently. Change occurs when we let go of our certainty — our beliefs and assumptions — and willingly create a new understanding of what's going on" (Wheatley, 1999).

When team members embrace conflict constructively, they work to be transparent, vulnerable, and receptive to differing views and perspectives. This allows them to challenge each other's thinking and initiate conversations about difficult-to-discuss topics, seeing disagreements as opportunities to learn.

Constructive conflict is dependent on a culture that embraces conflict expression — the way in which group members communicate and express

differences. Diversity of thought is an opportunity to learn, not a threat. If groups lack the ability to exercise conflict expression, their interactions can either break down or devolve into "groupthink" (Janis, 1982). This is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when the desire to maintain harmony becomes the dominant motivation in conversations or when information contrary to a majority of opinions is silenced.

Becoming more competent in dealing with conflict is first and foremost a personal practice of observing and managing internal reactions. Strong reactions trigger emotional responses that override thinking. Our challenge is to reframe these experiences of negative and counterproductive reactions into neutral or positive states.

Marcia Reynolds, author of *The Discomfort Zone* (2014), offers a few suggestions to try when you are triggered. First, take responsibility for your own reactions. Instead of blaming others, own your reaction and, without beating yourself up, acknowledge it. Pull back respectfully from the interaction and go deeper into yourself. Give attention to your physiological responses — body sensations, muscle tension, and breathing. Just this act of noticing creates a calming effect.

Then ask yourself: What feelings are being stirred by this situation or difference? Is it fear, anger, surprise, or disappointment? When feelings can be named, there is more potential for control and understanding. Labeling enables us to give honest feedback to our teammates. "I am feeling anxious, or angry, or sad about …" Then listen to what others have to say. Often others see the issue from entirely different viewpoints.

The final step is to find a word to capture a positive feeling from this reflection. Perhaps it is the feeling of calmness, composure, or equanimity. Each of us has the power to shift our own emotional state when triggered.

## ACTIONABLE LEARNING

For team learning to be transformative, the learners must focus on deep inquiry into problems of practice to identify not only gaps in knowledge, but also discover new theories of action. When this happens, the learning curve shifts and participants are motivated to collectively identify what new actions lead to greater success for learning. We refer to this as actionable learning.

In the business world, collaborative teams that engage in this kind of learning are often called communities of practice, a term coined by Etienne Wenger (1998), whose research found that peer-to-peer interactions co-evolve into collective meaning making to find the best course for action.

When groups commit to building an integral community, they experience a high degree of satisfaction, collective efficacy, and an appetite to keep learning and improving. Actionable learning communities constantly assess: What do we know and what don't we know? Why is this important? How can we apply what we are coming to understand?

But the ability to ask probing questions is not automatic. The more top-down an organization is, the less likely the team members are primed to ask probing questions. This means that teams often need practice posing questions and probing for depth of understanding. A productive starting place is to bring the team together to ask questions about a program or curriculum that has been in place for some time and has a fair degree of fidelity in the implementation.

Initially, the questions start with general summaries that focus on teaching and learning, such as: What part of this program best supports your teaching? What part of the program best serves your students? Even in this early stage in the conversation, different responses will become evident and raise questions of the status quo. Professionals often take common knowledge for granted and are astonished to learn that colleagues have entirely different understandings.

One trap that can bog down teams is when one or two members appear to be expert and dominate the conversation. This causes others to stop conversing. When expertise becomes evident, it is important for the leader to ask how this expertise was gained. Teaching is an applied practice, and those who are experts have usually worked diligently to perfect these skills. This places the emphasis on effort, not on talent, and helps rebalance the conversation.

For example, in a writing inquiry, it became evident that a few of the teachers had taken extra workshops and read books to become self-taught writing experts, while the other teachers were dependent on simple writing exercises provided by outside sources. In another case, the teachers found that some of their colleagues were daunted by the new technology additions and that their fear kept them from even trying the software.

On its face, this seems simple, but the real work comes as groups begin to ask: What are we learning here? What might we do next? At this point, the leader needs to step back and encourage the team to self-organize by watching for evidence of conversations focused on proactive action steps. In one case, the teachers invited an expert peer to conduct a series of workshops on specific areas of writing. In another, they asked for professional learning and release time to visit and observe the new technology in action.

## EXAMPLE: TEAM LEARNING IN ACTION

At an elementary school in California, teachers conducted mini action research projects as part of an assessment of their programs. For the spring term, teachers formed teams focused on questions of practice proposed by their peers. Each team created a plan for an ongoing

## ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS FOR TEAMS

The questions here can support teams in discovering where they stand on the essential conditions for transforming teamwork. Ask all team members to respond to the questions and reflect, individually or together, on their answers. Consider readministering these questions in the future to allow teams to measure growth over time.

| Psychological safety | Constructive conflict | Actionable learning |
|---|---|---|
| Teams that feel safe are more likely to take risks, admit mistakes, and express diverse perspectives. Working in a positive, judgment-free space empowers teams to activate deep inquiry around problems of practice, leading to greater innovative thinking. | Engaging in constructive conflict requires new competencies. Smart teams monitor healthy and unhealthy conflict and intervene as needed. Collaboration is transformed when team members share their differences around perceptions, knowledge, and assumptions. | Teams engaged in actionable learning constantly assess: What do we know, and what don't we know? Why is this important? How can we apply what we are coming to understand? |
| To what degree do I trust members of my team with my concerns, ideas, and uncertainties?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | How skillful am I at summarizing conflicts and using them productively?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | How regularly does our team asks deep questions of practice?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High |
| To what degree do other members seem to have concern for my well-being?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | When collaborating, what is my comfort level when others share different perspectives or points of view?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | How much does our team challenge the status quo and examine assumptions around current theories of action?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High |
| What is the frequency, if any, with which I withhold information or perspectives from the group?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | What ability do I have to intentionally draw out differences in the way others think and perceive?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High | How well can our team self-organize for collective learning that leads toward results?<br><br>Low 1 2 3 4 High |

investigation around the question. The teams worked with their own students and then met at intervals to compare notes on findings.

At the end of the term, the school held a symposium in which each team presented a poster session describing the research and reporting on the changes in practice (**actionable learning**) resulting from the investigation. All went well until the last presentation. Suddenly, one teacher and the librarian challenged each other. As their voices got louder, the conflict escalated, and onlooking teachers began to shift uncomfortably (**psychological safety** threatened).

The conflict centered around a project in which the 5th- and 6th-grade teachers had encouraged student groups to select books to read and then participate in self-guided discussions. The teachers were perfecting a protocol for student-run discussions and

wanted to test one teacher's assertion that students were more engaged when they chose the books.

Because the teachers did not have time to read all the books ahead of time, some read the stories along with the students. The teachers had not encountered any problems with the student selections. The librarian, on the other hand, felt that every book the students read needed to be vetted by the educator in charge and that the teachers had been irresponsible to run discussions without having previously read the book.

The principal of the school, skilled in **constructive conflict**, stepped in between the loud voices and asked the teachers to pause. Addressing the teachers in conflict, she acknowledged their strong feelings and then turned to the other teachers and asked them to help her summarize the key issues, which she listed on two charts.

As their peers described the two viewpoints, the principal asked the librarian and the 6th-grade teacher to add to and clarify their points of view. As they felt listened to, they calmed down and engaged in meaningful dialogue about the issues.

Soon, the conversation shifted to issues of student agency and censorship. Several teachers pointed out that it was not just books, but the students' life experiences that most often brought up uncensored and often uncomfortable topics into the classroom. All agreed that while teachers must be constantly vigilant, they can't control all the variables, which meant they needed skills for responding in the moment. The librarian realized that choosing books for a library was different than for a classroom discussion.

The principal wrapped up the discussion by pointing out the value of constructive conflict. The librarian and the teacher agreed to follow up with the principal the next day to address any unresolved issues or discomfort. Before leaving, the teachers reflected on the power of a day devoted to their own learning and the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with their colleagues (re-establish **psychological safety**).

This example illustrates why teams must pay attention and respond to psychological safety, build protocols for constructive conflict, and focus on learning that is actionable. When teams learn how to learn together, they don't complain about time being wasted and indeed will often call a team meeting whenever they feel that a better solution might need to be considered.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge reminds us that learning is where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (Senge, 1991).

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