

14th Annual
Hawker Brownlow

Thinking & Learning Conference

COLIN SLOPER

FRIDAY 19 MAY

**Are You a Group or a Team? – How to Work
Together for Student Success!**

Session 1

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COLIN SLOPER

Colin Sloper has been a teacher, assistant principal and principal in government schools for the past 35 years. In the course of his career he has been involved in the establishment of five new state government schools, including his time as principal of Pakenham Springs Primary School in Victoria. Because of his leadership and collaborative work with the school community, Pakenham Springs became the first recognised model of a professional learning community (PLC) in Australia.



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Phone: (03) 8558 2444 Fax: (03) 8558 2400
Toll Free Ph: 1800 334 603 Fax: 1800 150 445
Website: www.hbe.com.au
Email: orders@hbe.com.au

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Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name:

Team Members:

Use the following rating scale to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of your team.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not True of Our Team

Our Team Is Addressing This

True of Our Team

1. _____ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.
2. _____ We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals to improve on this level of achievement we are working interdependently to attain (SMART goals are specific and strategic, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound. SMART goals are discussed at length on page 89).
3. _____ Each team member is clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of our course or grade level and each unit within the course or grade level.
4. _____ We have aligned the essential learning with state and district standards and the high-stakes assessments required of our students.
5. _____ We have identified course content and topics we can eliminate to devote more time to the essential curriculum.
6. _____ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.
7. _____ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.
8. _____ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
9. _____ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.
10. _____ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student's mastery of essential learning.
11. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.

12. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. _____ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. _____ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
16. _____ We have developed or utilized common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. _____ We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice each year.

Establishing Collective Commitments to Enhance the Effectiveness of Teams

A reluctance to change their traditional classroom practices is not the only reason educators tend to drift away from substantive conversations about teaching and learning if parameters are not in place to guide their work. Conversations about the trivial are safer. If teachers are to work collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses and grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective. After all, you were hired for your professional expertise, but what if the results from a common assessment demonstrate that while your colleagues' students are successful, your students are not? We have seen evidence that some teachers would prefer not to know their strengths and weaknesses in relation to their colleagues' because it is not worth the risk of being exposed and vulnerable.

In his review of the dysfunctions of a team, Patrick Lencioni (2003) contends that the first and most important step in building a cohesive and high-performing team is the establishment of vulnerability-based trust. Individuals on effective teams learn to acknowledge mistakes, weaknesses, failures, and the need for help. They also learn to recognize and value the strengths of other team members and are willing to learn from one another.

The fear of vulnerability leads to the second team dysfunction: avoidance of productive conflict. Dysfunctional teams prefer artificial harmony to insightful inquiry and advocacy. As a result, they avoid topics that require them to work interdependently. Even decisions that would appear to require joint effort fail to generate genuine commitment from individuals on the team. Members settle for the appearance of agreement rather than pushing each other to pledge to honor the agreement through their actions. The avoidance of conflict and lack of commitment lead to yet another dysfunction of a team: avoidance of accountability. Team members are unwilling to confront peers who fail to work toward team goals or to honor team decisions. Finally, since members are unwilling to commit to purpose, priorities, and decisions, and are unwilling to hold each other accountable, they inevitably are inattentive to results. When groups demonstrate the five dysfunctions of a team—the inability to (1) establish trust, (2) engage in honest dialogue regarding disagreements, (3) make commitments to one another, (4) hold each other accountable, and (5) focus on results—the team process begins to unravel (Lencioni, 2003).

Leaders can help teams avoid these dysfunctions in several ways. First, and very importantly, they can model vulnerability, enthusiasm for meaningful exploration of disagreements, articulation of public commitments, willingness to confront those who fail to honor decisions, and an unrelenting focus on and accountability for results. For example, Principal McDonald could acknowledge that he made a mistake in his initial approach to creating high-performing teams and admit that he needs the help of the faculty in altering the team process so that it benefits students. He could invite open dialogue about specific proposals to refocus teams on matters impacting learning and help build shared knowledge regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal. He could make commitments to the staff regarding what he is prepared to do to support their efforts and address their concerns. He could demonstrate his

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commitment to the decisions they reach by confronting those who violate them. Finally, he could clarify the indicators they would monitor as a school to maintain their focus on results.

Furthermore, Principal McDonald could help staff members engage in professional dialogue designed to address the dangers of a dysfunctional team. Teams benefit not only from clarity regarding the purpose of their collaboration but also from clarity regarding how they will work together and what is expected of each member. Once again, simply putting people in groups does not ensure a productive, positive experience for participants. Most educators can remember a time when they worked in a group that was painfully inefficient and excruciatingly ineffective. But teams increase their likelihood of performing at high levels when they clarify their expectations of one another regarding procedures, responsibilities, and relationships.

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All groups establish norms—ground rules or habits that govern the group—regardless of whether or not they take the time to reflect on and articulate the norms they prefer for their team. But when individuals work through a process to create explicitly stated norms, and then commit to honor those norms, they increase the likelihood they will begin to function as a collaborative team rather than as a loose collection of people working together.

Team norms are not intended to serve as rules but rather as collective commitments—public agreements shared among the members (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Effective teams do not settle for “sorta” agreements; they identify the very specific commitments members have made to each other.

Here again, learning community members will begin the challenging task of articulating collective commitments for each team by building shared knowledge regarding best practices and strategies for implementing those practices. For example, one study of high-performing teams (Druskat & Wolff, 2001) finds that members consistently demonstrated high emotional intelligence in the following characteristics.

- **Perspective taking:** Members are willing to consider matters from the other person’s point of view.
- **Interpersonal understanding:** Members demonstrate accurate understanding of other group members’ spoken and unspoken feelings, interests, and concerns.
- **Willingness to confront:** Members speak up when an individual violates commitments, but they confront the person in a caring way aimed at building consensus and shared interpretations of commitments.
- **Caring orientation:** Members communicate positive regard, appreciation, and respect. A close personal relationship is not a prerequisite of an effective team, but mutual respect and validation are critical.
- **Team self-evaluation:** The team is willing and able to evaluate its effectiveness.

Building the Collaborative Culture of a PLC

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- **Feedback solicitation:** The team solicits feedback and searches for evidence of its effectiveness from external sources as part of a process of continuous improvement.
- **Positive environment:** The team focuses on staying positive—positive affect, positive behavior, and the pursuit of positive outcomes. Members cultivate positive images of the group’s past, present, and future.
- **Proactive problem solving:** Members actively take the initiative to resolve issues that stand in the way of accomplishing team goals.
- **Organizational awareness:** Members understand their connection to and contribution to the larger organization.
- **Building external relationships:** The team establishes relationships with others who can support their efforts to achieve their goals.

We also recommend that team members have an honest and open dialogue about the expectations they bring to the process by asking each other to reflect on and discuss his or her past experience with groups. Ask each participant to describe a time when he or she was a member of a group, committee, task force, or so on that proved to be a negative experience. Then ask each participant to explain the specific behaviors or conditions that made it so negative. Next, invite each participant to describe a personal experience in which he or she felt the power and synergy of an effective team. Record the answers, and turn the group’s attention to identifying commitments that would prevent the negative and promote the positive aspects of team membership if all participants pledged to honor those norms.

We offer the following six tips for creating norms.

1. **Each team should create its own norms:** Asking a committee to create norms all teams should honor is ineffective. Norms are collective commitments that members make to each other, and committees cannot make commitments for us. Furthermore, norms should reflect the experiences, hopes, and expectations of a specific team’s members.
2. **Norms should be stated as commitments to act or behave in certain ways rather than as beliefs:** The statement, “We will arrive to meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout the meeting,” is more powerful than, “We believe in punctuality.”
3. **Norms should be reviewed at the beginning and end of each meeting for at least six months:** Norms only impact the work of a team if they are put into practice over and over again until they become internalized. Teams should not confuse writing norms with living norms.
4. **Teams should formally evaluate their effectiveness at least twice a year:** This assessment should include exploration of the following questions.

- Are we adhering to our norms?
- Do we need to establish a new norm to address a problem occurring on our team?
- Are all members of the team contributing to its work?
- Are we working interdependently to achieve our team goal?

5. **Teams should focus on a few essential norms rather than creating an extensive laundry list:** Less is more when it comes to norms. People do not need a lot of rules to remember, just a few commitments to honor.
6. **One of the team's norms should clarify how the team will respond if one or more members are not observing the norms:** Violations of team norms must be addressed. Failure to confront clear violations of the commitments members have made to each other will undermine the entire team process. We will address the issue of how to confront violations in chapter 9.

When done well, norms can help establish the trust, openness, commitment, and accountability that move teams from the trivial to the substantive.

When done well, norms can help establish the trust, openness, commitment, and accountability that move teams from the trivial to the substantive. No team should work without the benefit of these clearly defined collective commitments. Neglecting to establish norms that clarify expectations is one of the major reasons teams fail (Blanchard, 2007).

Leaders can and should take each of the purposeful steps presented in this chapter:

1. Creating teams on the basis of a common responsibility for pursuing the critical questions of learning
2. Providing them with time to collaborate
3. Guiding them to the most powerful questions that impact learning
4. Asking teams to create specific products that should flow naturally from the dialogue of a team focused on the right works
5. Helping them create collective commitments that facilitate the trust, openness, and clarity of expectations essential to effective teams

Those steps can help create the structure for meaningful team dialogue; however, two more critical steps must be taken to help turn the focus of the team to improved student learning.

6. Collaborative teams must develop and pursue SMART goals.
7. Individual teachers and teams must have access to relevant and timely information.

These steps will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Why Should We Use Teams as Our Basic Structure?

“Empowered teams are such a powerful force of integration and productivity that they form the basic building block of any intelligent organization” (Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993, p. 66).

“Teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done. . . . Working in teams is the norm in a learning organization” (Senge et al., 1994, pp. 354–355).

Teams “bring together complementary skills and experience that . . . exceed those of any individual on the team.” Teams are more effective in problem solving, “provide a unique social dimension that enhances . . . work,” motivate, and foster peer pressure and internal accountability (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 18).

In the most innovative organizations teaming *is* the culture. Today’s leaders must therefore build a culture where teaming is expected and begins to feel natural (Edmonson, 2013).

“The ability to develop and support high-functioning teams schoolwide is essential to ensuring improved and inspired learning for all learners—adults or children” (D’Auria, 2015, p. 54).

“A team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone. . . . They have become the vehicle for moving organizations into the future. . . . Teams are not just nice to have. They are hard-core units of the production” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 17).

“Educators work alone more than any other professionals in modern America. Most professions have come to recognize the value of teamwork as a better way to understand and solve ‘problems of practice.’ . . . Fortunately, there appears to be new interest in forms of collaboration among educators. . . . ‘Professional learning communities’ are increasingly popular” (Wagner, 2007).

“Influencers increase the capacity of others by asking them to work in teams with interdependent relationships. . . . We increase capacity when we work together rather than in isolation” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 183).

“We now have compelling evidence that when teachers team up with their colleagues they are able to create a culture of success in schools, leading to teaching improvements and student learning gains. The clear policy and practice implication is that teaching is a team sport” (Fulton & Britton, 2011, p. 4).

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Why Should We Collaborate?

“The single most important factor for successful school restructuring and the first order of business for those interested in increasing the capacity of their schools is building a collaborative internal environment” (Eastwood & Louis, 1992, p. 215).

When groups, rather than individuals, are seen as the main units for implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they facilitate development of shared purpose for student learning and collective responsibility to achieve it (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 38).

“[High-achieving schools] build a highly collaborative school environment where working together to solve problems and to learn from each other become cultural norms” (WestEd, 2000, p. 12).

“The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003, p. 7).

“Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others, the prospect of truly repositioning schools . . . is not likely” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 237).

“It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms” (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005, p. 4).

Teacher collaboration in strong professional learning communities improves the quality and equity of student learning, promotes discussions that are grounded in evidence and analysis rather than opinion, and fosters collective responsibility for student success (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

“Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any one of them can achieve alone” (Carroll, 2009, p. 13).

High-performing, high-poverty schools build deep teacher collaboration that focuses on student learning into the culture of the school. Structures and systems are set up to ensure teachers work together rather than in isolation, and “the point of their collaboration is to improve instruction and ensure all students learn” (Chenoweth, 2009, p. 17).

Teachers should be provided with more time for collaboration and embedded professional development during the school day and year. . . . Expanding time for collaboration during the school day “facilitates the development of effective professional learning communities among teachers” (Farbman et al., 2014, p. 25).

“When teachers work together on collaborative teams, they improve their practice in two important ways. First, they sharpen their pedagogy by sharing specific instructional strategies for teaching more effectively. Second, they deepen their content knowledge by identifying the specific standards students must master. In other words, when teachers work together they become better teachers” (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015, p. 83).

“We must stop allowing teachers to work alone, behind closed doors and in isolation in the staffrooms and instead shift to a professional ethic that emphasizes collaboration. We need communities within and across schools that work collaboratively to diagnose what teachers need to do, plan programs and teaching interventions and evaluate the success of the interventions” (Hattie, 2015b, p. 23).

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Part Five

Tips for Moving Forward: Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams

1

Create meaningful teams: Ensure that teams are created on the basis of shared responsibility for pursuing the critical questions of teaching and learning with a particular group of students; for example, by course or by grade level.

2

Make time for collaboration: Work with staff to find creative ways to provide more time for team collaboration, including ways of using existing time more effectively.

3

Develop widespread leadership: Disperse leadership more widely by identifying team leaders for any team with more than three people. Meet with team leaders on a regular basis to identify problematic areas of the process, and develop strategies for resolving those problems.

4

Make decisions on the basis of evidence: Ask teams to build shared knowledge—to learn together—as they approach each new task in the collaborative process.

5

Build the capacity of teams to succeed in the PLC process by providing them with essential tools: Make supporting research, templates, protocols, exemplars, worksheets, and timelines available to teams to assist them in each step of the process.

6

Continually assess the progress of teams: Monitor the work of each team through ongoing assessment of their products, regular meetings with team leaders, and formal self-evaluations. Respond immediately to a team that is having difficulty.

7

Lead by example: Building-level leadership teams should model everything being asked of the collaborative teams, including meeting on a regular basis, staying focused on issues with the greatest impact on student achievement, establishing and honoring collective commitments, and working toward SMART goals.

8

Provide for cross-team collaboration: Create procedures to ensure teams are able to learn from one another.

9

Expand the knowledge base available to teams: Look for ways to link teams with relevant resources inside and outside of your building.

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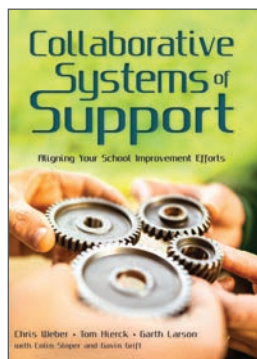
Celebrate teams: Make teams the focus of recognition and celebration (see chapter 9). Take every opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of teams.

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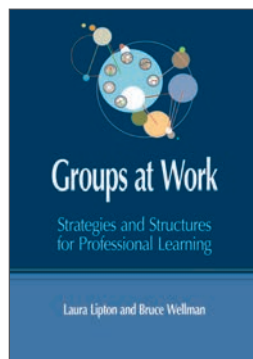
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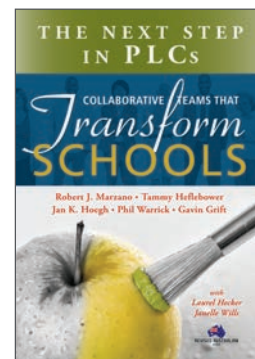
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