

# THE SKILLFUL TEAM LEADER

A Resource for Overcoming Hurdles to  
Professional Learning for Student Achievement

ELISA MACDONALD



# Contents

<b>Dilemma Questions Index</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Figures and Tables</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Part I: Foundations</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. A Skillful Approach</b>	<b>3</b>
This chapter outlines the key components of a skillful approach to overcoming hurdles to team learning for student achievement. It also provides valuable information to readers about the unique format and organization of this resource book.	
A Note From One Team Leader to Another	3
The Need for Skillful Team Leadership	4
An Introduction to a Skillful Approach: Values, Mindset, Intelligence, Skill	4
Important Information Regarding the Writing and Organization of This Book	8
<b>2. Mindful About Mindset</b>	<b>13</b>
This chapter intends to heighten awareness of the roles that mindset and adult development play in team learning for student achievement. It addresses the hurdles a team leader can face when she or her team members have a fixed mindset, and it suggests strategies for fostering a school culture rooted in a growth mindset.	
Mindset	13
Deconstructing the Fundamental Mindset Questions	15
The Developing Mind	19
Can We Change Our Minds?	21
Hurdles to Maintaining a Growth Mindset	22

Consider School Culture: Shifting From a Fixed Mindset Culture to a Growth Mindset Culture	22
A Final Word	25
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	26
<b>Part II: Hurdles</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3. Alone Together: Overcoming Hurdles to Foster a High-Functioning, High-Impact Collaborative Team</b>	<b>29</b>
Foundational Value: Collaboration	29
Collaboration is fundamental to professional learning, but what does a team leader do with a group that is a team in name only? This chapter applies a skillful approach to hurdles that can obstruct collaborative inquiry. It offers suggestions to solve com- mon dilemmas facing team leaders as they work to build a cohe- sive team that has a high impact on student learning, sometimes up against a school “culture of alone together.”	
What Is Collaboration, and Why Is It Needed?	29
Hurdles to Fostering a High-Functioning, High-Impact Collaborative Team	33
Considerations for Group Agreements	38
Consider School Culture: Shifting From a Culture of Alone Together to a Collaborative Culture	50
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	53
<b>4. Not It: Overcoming Hurdles to Achieve Shared Leadership for Learning</b>	<b>55</b>
Foundational Value: Shared Leadership	55
Professional learning relies on the foundational value of shared leadership. This is more than sharing the workload; it is sharing responsibility for learning. But what if leaders and teachers are unaccustomed to sharing? This chapter applies a skillful approach to the hurdles a team faces when leading each other. It offers solu- tions to complex dilemmas for team leaders who seek to foster shared responsibility for learning within a team and school. It examines the gap in school culture between believing in shared leadership and putting it into practice, and it offers strategies for team leaders to begin closing the gap.	
What Is Shared Leadership, and Why Is It Important?	55
Hurdles to Achieving Shared Leadership for Learning	56
Consider School Culture: Shifting From a Culture of Dependency to a Culture of Shared Decision Making	74
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	78

<b>5. Seemingly SMART: Overcoming Hurdles to Set and Attain Impactful Goals</b>	<b>79</b>
Foundational Value: Goal Setting and Attainment	79
Schools value goal setting and attainment as a means to achieve professional learning for student achievement, but how can a team uphold that value when investment in goals is low and accountability is high? Building upon Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neill’s work around SMART goals, this chapter applies a skillful approach to dilemmas encountered when setting and advancing toward long-term goals and small student-learning targets. It offers team leaders strategies to engage a team in a process for goal setting in order to maximize impact on teacher practice and student learning. It explores the challenges of goal setting in schools where a “scapegoat culture” exists, and it suggests actions team leaders can take to shift to a culture of mutual responsibility.	
What Are SMART Goals, and Why Are They Important?	79
Hurdles to Setting and Attaining Impactful SMART Goals	80
Consider School Culture: Shifting From a Scapegoat Culture to a Culture of Mutual Accountability	99
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	102
<b>6. Off-Course Discourse: Overcoming Hurdles to Lead a Team in Rigorous Discourse</b>	<b>103</b>
Foundational Value: Rigorous Discourse	103
Professional learning requires teams to engage in rigorous discourse, but what if discourse is just talk? This chapter applies a skillful approach to overcoming hurdles brought about by challenging conversations about data sometimes laden with blame, excuses, and assumptions. It offers strategies to team leaders to facilitate discourse that is evidence based, dialogic, culturally proficient, reflective, and actionable, even in schools where the “culture of nice” keeps talk superficial.	
What Is Rigorous Discourse, and Why Is It Important?	103
Hurdles to Leading a Team in Rigorous Discourse	106
Consider School Culture: Shifting from a Culture of Nice to an Honest, Up-front Culture	126
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	130
<b>7. Inertia: Overcoming Hurdles to Lead an Action-Oriented Team for Continuous Improvement</b>	<b>131</b>
Foundational Value: Continuous Improvement	131
In professional learning, teams strive for continuous improvement, but how does a team do so when there is resistance to	

change? This chapter applies a skillful approach to hurdles put forth by internal and external obstacles to change. It offers strategies to transform team learning into actions that yield sustainable results for teachers and students, even when a school's culture seems acidic to change.

What Are Action-Oriented Teams, and Why Are They Important?	131
Hurdles to Leading an Action-Oriented Team for Continuous Improvement	132
Consider School Culture: Shifting from a Culture Acidic to Change to a Culture of Continuous Improvement	147
Application to Your Work: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act	150
<b>A Closing Note</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>153</b>
Resource 3.1 Function vs. Impact	155
Resource 3.2 Team Function, Impact Matrix Indicators	157
Resource 3.3 Compass Points: An Exercise in Understanding Styles in Group Work	161
Resource 3.4 Hopes and Fears Exercise	165
Resource 4.1 Adapted Consultancy Protocol	167
Resource 4.2 Is Your School at Its Highest Leadership Capacity?	169
Resource 5.1 Making the Shift From Seemingly SMART to SMART	171
Resource 5.2 SMA-H-RT Guiding Questions	175
Resource 5.3 Data Analysis Protocol	177
Resource 6.1 Six Phases of Adapting Data-Driven Instruction	179
<b>References</b>	<b>181</b>

---

# A Skillful Approach

This chapter outlines the key components of a skillful approach to overcoming hurdles to team learning for student achievement. It also provides valuable information to readers about the unique format and organization of this resource book.

## A Note From One Team Leader to Another

*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 fifteen 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 entrypoint 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 opportunities to develop my capacity to lead teams as a teacher, coach, consultant, and administrator. These experiences and my coaching of other team leaders in numerous districts have led me to appreciate the craftsmanship of leading a team of adults. This book comes from years of listening to team leaders' dilemmas and reflecting on my own. It comes from mulling over moments when my response succeeded in overcoming a hurdle to team learning or unintentionally created another. It comes from an ongoing quest for practical solutions grounded in theory and research. It comes from the belief that although hurdles can seem impossible to move past, they can in fact be catalysts for greater learning when we approach them skillfully.*

*A dear friend calls the content of this book "revolutionary common sense." If you lead a team and discover, like me, that the more you work to develop impactful professional learning, the more you need to learn, then I ask you to join me to revolutionize team leadership . . . and what better place to start than with our own common sense.*

—Elisa

## THE NEED FOR SKILLFUL TEAM LEADERSHIP

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 teachers to regularly look at student work together, but her team withholds critical feedback essential for learning and growth. This presents the team leader with the dilemma, *How do I facilitate rigorous discourse when we can't move beyond superficial talk* (Ch. 6)? 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 actions* (Ch. 7)?

Team hurdles often crop up because of what is going on inside the team, but often 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 the dilemma, *How do I foster shared leadership for learning when no one has authority to lead (including me)* (Ch. 4)? School culture can also contribute to the hurdles a team must overcome. For example, *When a "culture of alone together" exists, where people are grouped together but act alone, a team leader must find a way to bring people together to collaborate* (Ch. 3).

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.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO A SKILLFUL APPROACH: VALUES, MINDSET, INTELLIGENCE, SKILL

### 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<sup>1</sup>:

1. Collaboration
2. Shared leadership

---

<sup>1</sup>These five values stem from the work of experts, namely, DuFour, Hord, and Fullan; leadership gurus Heifetz, Wagner, Kegan, and Lahey; and experts on organizational change, Argyris, Schein, and Senge.



3. Goal setting and attainment
4. Rigorous discourse
5. Continuous improvement

To anyone versed in professional learning community (PLC) literature, this list should sound familiar: in fact, perhaps so familiar that the meaning is watered down. The skillful team leader has an elevated, nuanced understanding of these five foundational values, and she fully commits to putting them into practice. A glimpse into what each value looks like follows. Each chapter in Part II of this book provides a more detailed understanding.

The skillful team leader values the following:

1. *Collaboration*. She 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 her team's function (*how they work interdependently*) and impact on student learning (*what they are working on and the outcomes achieved*) (Ch. 3).
2. *Shared leadership*. He does not simply share leadership within his 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 (Ch. 4).
3. *Goal setting and attainment*. She does not set and implement team goals out of compliance but works diligently with her team to attain impactful goals that deeply matter to teachers, students, and the school. Driven by purpose, the team leader advances her team through the inquiry cycle to achieve measured gains for students (Ch. 5).
4. *Rigorous discourse*. He does not settle for team discourse that promotes more of the same talk and practice, but he gently and purposefully prods his team to engage in evidence-based discourse that challenges cultural assumptions held by leaders, teachers, and students so that actionable knowledge is gained (Ch. 6).
5. *Continuous improvement*. She is not satisfied with team learning that doesn't result in replicable, long-lasting change (Ch. 7).

### **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 (explained further in chapter 2) 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 nec-



essary skill for any team leader to facilitate ongoing learning. Being able to *influence* mindset brings about desired change (Chapter 2 explores the roles mindset and adult development play in team learning).

## 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.

## Skill

A skillful approach to overcoming hurdles to professional learning for student achievement requires a team leader to anchor her leadership in the five foundational values, to hold the mindset that every teacher has the capacity to learn and change, and to read and respond effectively to the emotional climate that a hurdle creates. Executing this approach requires skill. The skillful team leader is able to do the following.

*Identify the hurdle.* Like pausing a movie at a critical point, the skillful team leader has the keen ability to 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, one of many proactive responses suggested throughout each chapter is "norming," also known as crafting a group agreement. Chapter 3 recom-

mends that teams norm not only for how a team functions (e.g., We will agree to disagree) but also for the team's 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, one strategy offered in multiple chapters is to “*find an entry point.*” This response requires the team leader to listen keenly to team members, sifting through the conversation to pull out a key thought, idea, or concern that needs to be explored further.
- *Follow-up response.* The skillful team leader's words and actions after a meeting assures the team is able to sustain gains made without creating another hurdle to learning. For instance, several chapters reference the “*check-in*” strategy, when 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. Finding solutions to team dilemmas is not a one person job, and often if one team encounters hurdles, others will too. 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). This type of learning leadership team is also beneficial at the school level. One strategy suggested throughout the book for school leadership teams is to “*model.*” The team leader together with other school leaders demonstrate the desired team behavior in their own leadership team meetings, which is sometimes easier said than done.

*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 chock-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 PLC, and they will struggle to achieve *sustainable* student improvement (Fullan, 2009). 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, & 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, the team leader faced with the dilemma, *How do I facilitate rigorous discourse when my team can't move beyond superficial talk* (Ch. 6), might attribute the problem to a team's discomfort with using a “looking at student