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I remember going to the circus as a child. All the sights and sounds – the towering tent, a crowd of clowns cavorting and the taste of the fairy floss as I licked my sticky fingers – are real in my memory. I can still feel the excitement centred in the three rings. Performers and animals moved at a dizzying pace. Acrobats tumbled and danced from ring to ring, animals pranced and plodded with precision, and strange machines that could shoot a human across the tent were assembled and dismantled before my very eyes. What a spectacle!

In many ways the circus of my childhood is very much like a school. Maybe at times the school doesn't run with the precision of a circus, but there is always some organisation to the movement, noise and commotion. And the performers – well, you might consider school teachers, students and administrators performers on parade.

Watch as the aerialists take their positions above the centre ring. The circus crew raises a net below them in case they fall as they fly from one trapeze to another. Could it be a team of teachers providing a safety net as students try out their wings? See the crowd of clowns stumbling out of the tiny car and filling the ring with joyous energy. Could it be a class of young adolescents exploding out of the classroom at the sound of the bell?

And then there are the lions and their tamer. I remember the anticipation I felt as a boy when the lions entered the ring. They were a sight to see – wild, majestic, powerful and even scary. Yet, at times they seemed gentle and graceful.

Some days when I walk into a team meeting, I picture myself walking into the circus ring with the lions. On my team there are powerful individuals – some snarling at each other, some silently slinking by – and yet, the group must perform together for an anxious audience. Will the performance be well organised – graceful in its efficiency – or will it be wild and out of control?

Are you with me in this metaphor? You see, working with my team of teachers is like being in the centre ring with a bunch of lions. Remember the lion that spends most of the time growling loudly, interrupting the act with the disturbance? That lion is the teacher with the biggest problem of the day. Imagine that teacher's complaints as angry growls. Watch the teacher strut around for a few minutes to mark their territory.

At the opposite end of the "cage" is a pair of docile lions. They are just going through the motions hoping for everything to end quickly so they can go back to their personal lives. *We have all witnessed these team members. They have no desire to make waves. They just sit back waiting for someone else to step up or make a mistake during the meeting. They don't cause any problems, but they attend the gathering to see what is happening.*

Look around your "lion's cage". Is there one lion that enters reluctantly or comes in late as the lion tamer cracks the whip? Do you see the lion that spends most of the time looking around and is continually off task? This lion seems confused – not sure of the routines and acting a little lost. This lion will probably ask a question that has already been asked or seem curious about everything. It is difficult to convince lions like this one to move. And when you *do* get them to move, they often head in the wrong direction.

Oh, and don't miss the "lions" that like to perform for the crowd. They do everything right. They are on cue and never miss a beat. They enjoy the praise and the applause. You'll find them in the centre of the cage.

Sharing the centre spotlight is the leader (or lion tamer) cracking a whip to keep the show moving along and everyone on task. Without this leader, the performance might become something of a feeding frenzy.

Look – it's time for the most amazing feat! The lion tamer lays the whip aside, stares into the eyes of the largest lion, cautiously opens its mouth and places their head inside.

The head-in-the-lion's-mouth trick is a symbol of ultimate risk taking. Team leaders take big risks, too. True, they may never experience lion saliva firsthand, but they *are* asked to make tough decisions, take risks, crack the whip and entertain crowds on a daily basis.

## The Art of Taming Something

We can't watch a lion-taming act without being awed by the precision and timing. We instinctively know that the taming and teamwork in the centre ring has taken hours of work and practice. Yet, in many cases, educators never consider taking time to tame a team. Instructional teams in our schools are expected to perform flawlessly without training. Teams and leaders need ongoing support, and every team needs long-term professional development.

Ten years ago, many schools spent time on team training, only to let their professional development model wither away. It is unusual to see schools go back to the basics and retrain new teachers and staff on the importance of teaming. Why? The answer is simple – new initiatives, new mandates and new district expectations. Imagine what would happen if the lion tamer introduced several new lions to the act, but didn't bother to train them. It's common sense that the result would be less than satisfactory – possibly even chaos! Teachers know that to implement successful teaming, there must be a long-term focus on teaming that provides quality resources and training – not just a once-every-five-year training that is soon forgotten.

Creating change and reform in middle level education starts with the teams. They are the backbone of the middle years. Middle years teachers are the fearless lions that might roar, wander or even strut their stuff, but in the end they are responsible for the best part of the show.

Use this book as a resource to reinvent or establish your school teams. *Taming of the Team* will focus on how to make sure that your teams spend their time on kids, curriculum and professional development. I will provide real examples to help move teams forward, to fortify the foundations of teaming, and offer new insights for encouraging effective teams. I might even throw in some funny references and stories to help make the text come alive because – let's admit it – sometimes people in schools can take themselves a little too seriously.

Taming a team is hard work. It takes dedication, strong leadership with a commitment to the foundation provided by the teaming concept and teachers who believe in teaming and want to work together.

Take a risk. Put your head into the mouth of the lion. Just remember, the middle years is like the circus big top – full of fun and surprises.

# Defining Teaming

*A critical element to success in the middle years is to create small, personalised learning communities by implementing interdisciplinary teaming. Teaming creates a context that enables students and teachers to better know one another, and allows teachers to better understand and support the learning of students. Teams generally focus on creating coordinated lesson plans; discussing student progress, problems and issues; and integrating curricula and instruction. The growing body of evidence supporting the positive impact of interdisciplinary teaming in the middle years and on students is difficult to refute. Students and teachers in schools that have implemented teaming and its associated practices with some degree of integrity consistently report more positive and productive learning environments. In addition, more large-scale and comprehensive studies have been conducted that successfully demonstrate the positive effects of teaming on student [achievement] outcomes.*

*Steven B. Mertens & Nancy Flowers*

Bringing a common group of students and teachers together helps foster communication and allows teachers to really get to know their students. This common group shares common experiences and helps tackle the daily tasks of school work. The group also shares a common vision and makes sure all decisions are in the best interests of their students. These groups are consistent in their policies and procedures and have a common mission statement that allows for student input and growth. This group is a team.

For many teams the mantra is simple – same teachers, same kids, one common goal.

- **Teams Help Students and Teachers See Connections**

Teams are designed to bring subjects together, so teachers can work with others outside of their learning areas.

This allows teachers and students to see connections in curriculum and provides flexibility to connect content where appropriate. The goals of every true team should be about kids, curriculum and professional development. If teams focus their energy on these elements, no one will ever question the legitimacy of teaming within the middle years.

- **Teams Make a Large School Feel Small**

Teaming helps make schools feel smaller. There are many large schools across the world, most of them in the United States. Some have more than 2500 students. There are even year-level buildings with more than 2000 students. Without question, some of these schools are too large.

*In many cases, schools that large could launch themselves into outer space with the energy and hormones that are produced within their walls.*

*Many experts say that the best size for a middle years school is around 700-1100 students. A school that size can have full electives and full class offerings with little or no sharing of teachers. But very seldom do regional offices make decisions on what is developmentally appropriate. They tend to make decisions on what is economically feasible. As schools unfortunately become larger, we need ways to make them feel smaller, and teams do that every day.*

These big schools beg for teaming. Because the teachers and the kids in a team are working toward the same purpose, they are building a community, and parents see that a group of teachers really understands and cares about their children.

- **Great Teams Increase Student Advocacy and Focus on Achievement**

If teams spend time talking about all of the students on their teams, student achievement will rise. There are several ways to make sure teams are focused on students. Think of the results that can happen when a whole group of adults focuses on the same group of kids! They can really get to know the students – who they are and what they need as individuals and as a group. Everybody will be working together to provide what’s best for this lucky selection of students. Together, they see that no student is left on the edges.

Second, the team can make sure each student has not only a team surrounding them and providing support, but also one special adult advocate who has a particular focus on them. This advocate checks in regularly with that student and helps to ensure success – making sure the student completes work, gets questions answered, finishes homework, completes all assignments and feels noticed.

Right! How can a team make sure they are talking about every single student? On page 138 I’ve outlined a way to do this. The idea isn’t original to me. I was lucky to see my good friend Kathy Hunt Ullock work with various teams across the world. One of the best strategies she used was an activity called “Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down”. This activity ensures that team members think about each student during the team meeting.

- **Teaming Is Not Just for the Middle Years**

Teaming and professional learning communities (PLCs) are blossoming all over the world. In East Chicago, Indiana, schools are teaming in Years 7–12. In Sandusky, Ohio, Perkins Local and Sandusky schools are teaming in Years 9

and 10. They focus on kids, curriculum and professional development. They do their own discipline plans and meet with students on a regular basis. They are discussing their curriculum. Teams in all year levels are spending time doing academic and behavioural plans for individualised students, and they are working on teacher consistency issues.

Primary schools are also working in professional learning communities. They are meeting to discuss student data, work on educational plans, plan curriculum and meet with parents as a team. Great schools know the value of teaming. They just struggle with how to make sure teams use the time effectively.

Teaming is not just a middle years concept. It is a smart idea for teachers and administrators of all levels, for parents and for students. The goal for all schools should be to figure out how to make sure teachers have the time to meet and work together. With limited school budgets and more accountability, teachers need this team time more than ever.

### **The Truth About Teaming**

Over the years, educators have referred to teaming as *professional study groups, professional learning communities, data teams and learning teams*. There are vertical teams, horizontal teams, elective teams, exploratory teams, academic teams and leadership teams. Yet, no matter what you call teaming, it is really just about a group of people coming together. It is not about the name, it is about the purpose of coming together. That purpose is to improve all facets of the school experience, including academic performance, for all students.