

*Solutions for Professional Learning Communities*

# How to Cultivate Collaboration in a PLC



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# Introduction

Cultivating collaboration in a professional learning community requires attention and constant care. It includes moving from isolation to collaborative teams and implementing a relentless focus on learning and results. Successful teams know that using a framework to define collaboration and high-performing teams assists them in evaluating their progress and improving their effectiveness. The five components of effective collaboration—focus, structure, process, roles and responsibilities, and relationships—were first described in “Creating Intentional Collaboration” (Sparks, 2008) and have been expanded on in our workshops and on-site coaching. We are grateful for our mentors, Richard and Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and the many educators we have learned from. We continue to learn about collaboration with each interaction and experience. We are fortunate indeed to have been associated with the best and brightest in the field of education for over thirty-five years.

## The Obstacles

Teams and individuals encounter obstacles and challenges as they collaborate, including:

- Negative attitudes and unproductive behaviors
- Lack of focus and clarity, mixed messages, and an overload of initiatives
- Policies, structures, and practices focused on what is good for adults and not necessarily on what is good for student success
- Uninspired staff and team meetings
- Destructive conflict and poor communication

## The Solution

The easy answer to overcoming these obstacles is to *commit to continuous improvement!* Make a promise to a thoughtful and relentless approach to team development and collaboration. Engage in and learn about practices that work. As Michael Fullan and Clif St. Germain (2006) describe in the book *Learning Places*, “What is worth fighting for is not to allow our schools to be negative by default, but to make them positive by design” (p. 19).

This book describes how teams work in detail and provides ideas and tips for cultivating collaboration. It focuses on the “how” of effective teaming. It does not include two critical components of teaming in a professional learning community (PLC): focus and structure. We recommend the many resources found within Professional Learning Communities at Work™ related to student learning and “what” the work is. One of the key questions teams must answer is, What will be the focus of our work while we’re together? According to Rick DuFour, “the important question is not ‘Are teachers collaborating?’ but rather ‘What are teachers collaborating about?’” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 91). What has become increasingly clear is that effective teams create an unrelenting focus on the four critical questions: (1) What knowledge and skills should every student acquire? (2) How will we know when every student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills? (3) How will we respond when some students do not learn? (4) How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who are already proficient? (See “Critical Issues for Team Consideration” at [go.hbe.com.au](http://go.hbe.com.au).)

Teams also create a viable and guaranteed curriculum, use formative and common assessments, and provide interventions to help all students learn. In addition to the clarity and focus, schools and teams attend to structure and organize teams by content or grade levels, provide time for teams to meet, and ensure that teams establish goals and use norms, agendas, and minutes. Leadership also provides direction and assists teams when they need help. To learn more about the work of collaborative teams in a professional learning community, see *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2010) and *Leverage: Using PLCs to Promote Lasting Improvement in Schools* (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015).

## Cultivating Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community

Each chapter includes a description of issues or barriers that teams encounter when collaborating and practical approaches and solutions for addressing them.

In addition, resources are identified and links are included in the text to provide additional tools and strategies.

Chapter 1, “Dispositions,” describes the attitudes and behaviors necessary for effective collaboration. Chapter 2, “Process,” provides ideas for engaging all participants to work together in meaningful ways. Chapter 3, “Roles and Responsibilities,” clarifies explicit roles and responsibilities in teams. Chapter 4, “Skills and Behaviors,” elaborates on skills and behaviors that individuals and teams can improve upon in the areas of communication, consensus, managing conflict, and facilitating data conversations. Chapter 5, “Conclusion,” concludes with an emphasis on collaborating for success.

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# Chapter 1

## Dispositions

We use the term *dispositions* to describe the qualities and traits that are observable when teams are working together. They are patterns in behavior, and they have profound impacts on people as they work.

### Common Issues

Why are dispositions important? Because negative or unproductive dispositions and attitudes interfere with effectiveness. These are the human behaviors that cause disruption and create lack of cohesiveness and mistrust. Not to mention that unproductive behaviors can interrupt the work and contribute to a lack of results. It is our premise that negative adult behavior should not interfere with the work of collaborative teams. What does it look like to allow behaviors to disrupt collaboration?

First, something happens—a disagreement, an action, a strong statement, a tone of voice. We may observe a positive reaction such as “I need to understand more. Let me try to understand your point of view.” Or, too often, we see a negative reaction. Responses may be quick and aggressive. Comments may take on a more personal and negative tone: “I totally disagree. What a crazy idea. How did you come up with that?” In this example, unintended consequences may occur. People may shut down and not talk as openly; they may make assumptions, become upset, withdraw, and become fearful. A minor episode may escalate into a major situation, and it can temporarily stop productivity.

Collaborative work is messy, and if teammates are rolling up their sleeves and digging into the work, invariably they will say or do something that will offend or cause a ripple. It is human nature. And when a behavior turns into a routine way of acting or a predictable pattern (and the behavior is getting in the way of being productive), that is when it becomes an issue for a team.

We asked teachers to describe actions and dispositions that get in the way of collaboration. We heard:

- Gives excuses rather than takes responsibility
- Is consistently distracted
- Is habitually late or absent
- Doesn't follow through and complete tasks
- Shows bias and is judgmental
- Uses negative language
- Reacts defensively to feedback
- Doesn't listen

We could generate a more comprehensive list of undesirable qualities and add to this list. We know what we do not like. However, the key is to minimize the undesirable behavior and focus on what is desirable. The following processes will help you both prevent and intervene when such behaviors arise.

## **Seek Clarity and Create Commitment for Productive Behaviors and Dispositions**

Schedule a conversation at the beginning of the year or during the year when your team needs a boost about working together. By being more explicit about what you desire in a team, you will have a better chance of achieving those qualities. It is much easier to have a discussion about the behaviors we struggle with and those we appreciate early in the team development process than later on when unproductive behaviors and qualities manifest inside our team work sessions. If we conduct the conversation at a safe time, it feels less targeted and personal. People are not on the defensive. It is a rational and thoughtful dialogue about what is important to each member of the team.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this activity is to explore what behaviors and qualities will support effective collaboration. It is designed to create a shared understanding among participants. The team does not need to reach consensus.

### **Steps**

First, create a list of the qualities and characteristics that may get in the way of being an effective team. Each person has different triggers or irritants based on his or her own beliefs and preferences. What bothers one person may not be a struggle for



another. The point is that individuals should know their own behavioral tendencies and what is conducive or destructive in their team or what teammates may react to. Every person has a perspective, and it may be different from others'. This is a safe conversation. Do not name names but rather talk about actions and behaviors.

After this conversation, it is important to move to a vision of dispositions the team desires when working together. Create a vision or a collective statement of what you do want. What beliefs, attitudes, and actions are present as we work together? This will include words from every participant, honoring each person's point of view. It is important to create a product as a result of the conversation. An example of a vision of "Dispositions We Value" is in figure 1.1.

#### **What Are the Dispositions We Value?**

Passion and commitment for teaching and learning—A core belief that all students can and will learn with appropriate time and support.

Inquisitive and growth-oriented behaviors—We thrive on challenge and are not defined by failures. We are willing to learn from others and define success by continuously learning and growing.

Inclusive—A belief in the power of the team, a true willingness to learn and explore ideas together.

Interdependent—Responsibility for and accountability to the work of the team. We depend on one another to meet the goals defined.

Transparent—Nothing is off limits in discussions, and pertinent information is shared.

Vulnerable—Acknowledgment that it isn't about having all the answers; it is about seeking help and asking for assistance.

Trustworthy—Being vulnerable with one another. "One's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 17).

Hard work ethic—Going that extra step and taking necessary time for quality work. Being perseverant and following through on tasks.

Tolerance for ambiguity—Not letting our confusion stop us from doing work. We commit to working toward clarity.

Optimistic and enthusiastic—A person who sees the possible rather than the impossible.

Positive presuppositional mindset—Assuming the best intentions when working with others.

**Figure 1.1: Vision of dispositions.**