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TransformED NI:
Transforming Teaching and Learning



Growing Great Teams: *Together we are stronger*



GROWING GREAT TEAMS: TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER

By InnerDrive



WHAT IS A TEAM?

The first useful step in exploring how to develop great teams is probably to define what one is. Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, in their classic 1993 book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, suggested the following:

Group – A collection of individuals connected only by proximity, circumstance or classification.

Working Group – A group of individuals with a common goal but who are independently accountable.

Team – A small number of people with complementary skills who are mutually accountable and interdependent.

As nice and comforting as it is to neatly make these distinctions, in the complexity of schools it may not be useful to have a fixed or rigid view of what a team is (Crome, 2023). It is worth recognising, though, that a team is more than a group of people working side by side and that common goals, complementary skills, interdependence and mutual accountability are all things we should strive for.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Bringing people together under a shared purpose to work interdependently has a wide range of potential benefits, including:

Cognitive Diversity & Problem Solving – Fixed beliefs and narrow perspectives are the enemies of effective decision-making and diverse teams consistently outperform even the best individuals because of improved error detection, bias avoidance, successful strategy selection and better problem-solving.

Professional Capital & Shared Cognition – By working together individuals can turn what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) would call

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human capital (individual talent) into social capital (group wisdom) and develop shared cognition which improves anticipation, collaboration, efficiency and adaptation.

Psychological Resilience & Burnout Prevention – High-performing teams demonstrate a level of empathy and mutual accountability that allows them to provide emotional scaffolding to each other in times of stress, lightening the load on any individual and protecting mental and physical well-being.

Collective Efficacy – Teams that develop a confidence they can succeed regardless of outside factors often have deeper feelings of agency, higher levels of persistence and innovation and in education, teacher collective efficacy has been shown to have a significant impact on student growth (2012).

In short, teams are not just helpful; they're vital. However, they don't happen by accident. They must be purposefully and systematically built and then supported.

BUILDING GREAT TEAMS

Great teams start with a purposeful design and like any structure, they need a strong foundation, clear architecture and the right materials. Tuckman's famous 1977 model of team development (forming, storming, norming and performing) can help leaders understand and normalise development stages. However, the rigidity can be unhelpful and so we will take a simpler lens.

Planning

High-performing teams rarely form by accident and so key questions for leaders are:

- Clarify purpose: Why does this team need to exist? What do we need them to achieve?
- Define roles: Who will be responsible for what? How will they complement each other?
- Set norms: What behaviours do we expect? How will they work together?

Construction

Once formed, it is important that leaders work quickly to create strong foundations by:

- **Building trust early:** Model vulnerability, share experiences and create opportunities for collaboration.
- **Creating connection:** Explore shared experiences and align everyone with the team's mission.
- **Establishing routines:** Collectively create systems and processes for common events and issues.

SUPPORTING GREAT TEAMS

Even the best teams need support and leaders have a key part to play in the management of culture and conflict if they want to sustain team performance.

Culture

Left to evolve organically, team and organisational cultures can quickly get out of hand and become destructive. Leaders must proactively build and sustain a level of psychological safety which makes people feel comfortable speaking up, taking risks and admitting mistakes. Positive team cultures balance freedom with responsibility so that members have a sense of autonomy which enables them to work independently and thrive but also feel accountable for their actions. We typically repeat the behaviours we are rewarded for and so it is important that leaders reinforce positive social norms through recognition and boost well-being and collective efficacy by celebrating progress and achievement.

Conflict

Conflict is sadly inevitable, but it doesn't have to be destructive. In fact, well-managed conflict can lead to better decisions and stronger relationships. The desire to preserve 'artificial harmony' is the very thing that prevents teams from engaging in the passionate, ideological debate that is necessary for any great project. (Lencioni, 2002). Leaders who want to leverage the power of conflict should normalise disagreement and frame it as a sign of engagement rather than dysfunction. It is important that issues are addressed early so that tension does not rise above productive levels and that the first priority is always to understand before seeking resolution or taking action.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Putting people together does not make them a team and great teams don't just happen; they're intentionally grown. High-performing teams are essential to high-performing schools and together we make better decisions, solve problems quicker, adapt more accurately and manage stress more effectively. The development of great teams needs careful planning ensuring a clear purpose, the right people and the creation of systems, processes and pro-social norms. Creation is just the start though and leaders need to proactively maintain a culture of safety, autonomy and accountability whilst encouraging positive conflict and managing friction as it occurs. Leaders who get this right can look forward to significant improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and well-being because ultimately, we are stronger together.

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Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (2015). The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization. Harvard Business Review Press.

Lencioni, P. M. (2002). The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable. Jossey-Bass.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blogs

What is psychological safety? mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-psychological-safety

Spiky Leaders, Rounded Teams <https://drchriswb.substack.com/p/spiky-leaders>

Book

Brown, B. (2018). Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts. Random House.

Coyle, D. (2018). The culture code: The secrets of highly successful groups. Bantam Books



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