



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators. In this month's issue, Bruce proposes that when collaboration is done at the highest levels of professionalism, it is an endeavor that is, like many artistic creations, a beauty to behold.

The Art of Collaboration



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Art is defined as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, and further, a skill that is attained by study, practice, and observation. All of these descriptors can be applied to the work of educators when they collaborate with one another in the interest of student learning. In my career I have had the opportunity to read about, study, analyze, and view up close the collaborative work of teachers, and I propose that when collaboration is done at the highest levels of professionalism, it is an endeavor that is, like many artistic creations, a beauty to behold.

Art requires effort, an investment of time, possible setbacks and rebounds, in-depth commitment, and products that are polished and complete. Additionally, art work includes extensive study, conscientious dedication, and purposeful goal setting. As I reflected on my experiences involving collaboration, I thought about the steps successful collaborators have applied to their work as well as actions which might impede the progress collaborative teams can eventually realize. Whether you are a collaborative team that has been working together for some time or whether you are just beginning to set up a structure in which collaboration can take place, the ideas expressed below may serve as reminders for how teams or groups can work together effectively. After establishing and periodically reviewing the agreed-upon protocols for how the team will work together, consider the information below so that your team can function at its optimum best.

Getting Started

Sacred Holdings

When teammates agree up front about the beliefs and practices they hold dear, then the participants know that these are non-negotiables. Hence, the team saves time down the road since each team member has had the opportunity to publicly share his or her thinking and the team has come to an agreement about what the members collectively value.

Front End Alignment

Following the practice of beginning with the end in mind has proven to be a powerful way of thinking for productive teams. They spend time discussing unit and assessment design in advance of their implementation so that all of their colleagues have time to study and prepare to teach the upcoming units. As they collaborate, they make sure to align all plans and outcomes with the standards they are to teach to ensure that instructional time is judiciously used. As a result of this front end alignment, they know before they begin teaching what success will look like and how to guide students to experience success when their learning is assessed.

Ego Management

It has been said that the most successful teams are the ones in which the members “leave their egos at the door” prior to a team session. These productive teams fully understand and believe that the team’s purpose is to promote student learning and not about individual personalities.

The NASCAR Principle

The term NASCAR refers to the association that promotes stock car racing. My NASCAR principle stands for Never Assume Something; Carefully Assess Reality. Teams might make the mistake of assuming that all members have a common vocabulary or a common conceptual understanding during a planning session only to learn down the line that they have been “talking about two different things.” A good rule of thumb is to always clarify up front before a discussion begins.

Win-Win Situation

Through dialogue, compromise and intelligent decision making, every effort should be made to ensure that the conclusive actions that team members take should result in a win-win situation for everyone involved – students, teachers, and parents.

Working Together

Positive Intent

It is important to remember that as professionals we come to our jobs with the positive belief that we can make a difference in the lives of children as well as in the lives of our co-workers. I have never met an educator who comes to work saying, “Let me see how I can underserve my kids today,” or “What are some ways that I can subvert the work of my colleagues in today’s team meeting?” Always assume positive intent and then acknowledge the work of your teammates so that an optimistic outlook remains the hallmark of the team’s work.

SMART Actions

Many teams follow the practice of establishing SMART (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-Bound) goals as they work together. My Just ASK colleague Sherri Stephens-Carter takes the idea of SMART goals one step further by having teams devise SMART actions. For example, instead of simply setting the goal to improve reading scores, the team should determine which reading practices need to be improved and make a plan to add or delete practices that will actually improve reading. Similarly, if the goal is to improve student attendance, find out which groups of students are having the biggest attendance problems and why, and target that sub-group. Another way of looking at this is to not only think outside the box but then to act outside the box as well.

Comic Relief

Team members need to have a safety valve, and that valve can come in the form of frequent comic relief. The work teachers do is complicated and multi-faceted, but we must remember the health value of laughter. Make sure to find humor in the ordinary events that occur in the school day, and then laugh long and laugh often!

Collective Bargaining

Teams must have open and honest discussions about how the team will function. In addition to establishing norms for communication purposes, the team should put in place a system to follow in order to make team decisions or ways to respond if a conflict should arise. Many teams make decisions by consensus which means that all points of view have been brought up and explored in depth and are not necessarily agreed upon by all team members. Although this situation may occur, consensus means that team members support the final team decision. If groups encounter conflict, practices to follow include honest and open conversations carried out in a respectful manner, truly listening to one another's viewpoints, and focusing on the problem at hand and not individual personalities.

Marinate, Don't Obfuscate

New ideas and approaches to learning should always be welcome at team settings. However, it is always prudent to talk about a new idea in depth and give it time to sink it before jumping in too quickly so as to avoid potential confusion. A misunderstood or badly implemented strategy might lead to discouragement and unwillingness to take chances in the future. When teammates have time to think about how to use a strategy and how it might make a difference in student learning and then bring those perspectives to the next team meeting, it might have a greater impact on student learning when it is finally implemented.

Staying Connected

Group Dynamics

Productive groups are earmarked by their energy and passion. They come to meetings ready and they typically bring their "A-game" to the sessions. Members understand that their participation is both a right and a responsibility, and they embrace their potential power of collectively "putting their heads together."

Wisdom of the Ages

The formation of a team is much like an arranged marriage in that the composition of the team may not be predictable. In many cases, a wide variety of ages may be represented on a given team. It is important to remember that teachers of all ages can bring a great deal of knowledge and skills that can help the team make progress and even thrive. It is also important to value each and every teammate, perhaps from different generations, for the insights and contributions they can provide.

Be A "Roll" Model

Procedures should be in place to welcome new team members to the setting and to make sure they understand the norms that the team follows during their collaborative sessions. New team members may include teachers both new to the school as well as new to the profession. Novices might experience frustrations or setbacks as they adjust to their new environment, and experienced team members can help their fellow teachers "roll with the punches" by providing encouragement, stories of their personal adversities, and the belief that we can all bounce back. Cheering on one's colleagues is one of the great advantages of collaboration.

Maintaining the Vision

Organizing Curriculum Closets

Heidi Hayes-Jacobs, a prominent proponent of curriculum mapping, believes that the best results will come when teachers, sift, sort, align, and organize their "curriculum closets." Individual team members can begin by sketching out an annual curriculum map and identifying the topics, skills and assessments that they will include in their instruction delivery. The next important step is for teachers to compare their individual maps with their teammates to identify "gaps, redundancies, and misalignments" as well as the best way to deliver instruction to their respective classes. In addition to organizing their curriculum closets, teachers can clean out their closets by discarding previous units that are not aligned with district or Common Core standards.

Blazing the Trail

Never forgetting that student learning is the entire purpose for teachers to collaborate, high-powered and progressive teams are creative and innovative as they explore practices that will positively impact student growth. They are not afraid to take risks, try new ideas, and keep abreast of compelling research that might make a difference for children. They believe that some of the greatest successes in educational practice results from forward thinking.

Data Dialogues

In order to make the most of the team's time together, team meetings must make time for an analysis and discussion related to student achievement data. The practice of holding data dialogues is often what separates propitious teams from less successful groups. The questions which should be the focus of conversations are not "What grades did the students receive?" or "How many students passed the test?" but instead "What did the students demonstrate that they have learned?" and "What does the data tell us they do not know?" The dialogue should occur regularly, perhaps 45 minutes to an hour at least every two weeks.

Preventive Maintenance

They might be called red flags or lessons learned but whatever the name, every effort should be made to help colleagues avoid practices which eat up precious instructional time or which do not truly contribute to student learning. One of the great benefits of collaboration is to share past experiences, both good and bad, with team members so that the advice which is provided can prevent heartache and frustration for others.

Extended Warranty

It has been my experience that when teammates work together over multiple years, their strength and ability to achieve success multiplies exponentially. They know each other so well that work gets done faster, discussions flow more smoothly, respect for diverse opinions are accepted, and kids are the ultimate beneficiaries of the team's work. I call this good will and professional excellence a much coveted extended warranty. It is a goal worth pursuing.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Covert Operations

Once a team gets its rhythm and begins to see the value of their collaborative efforts, it is important to be open and honest about the instructional practices that make a difference in student learning. When teachers discover practices that promote student learning, and then keep the strategies to themselves, it can lead to distrust and bad feelings once the "covert operation" becomes public. The guiding principle should be: All adults are committed to the success of all other adults.

Sugarcoating

Wise collaborators learn that it is ineffectual to skew their data analysis or to read into data something that isn't there. It is human nature to want our work to make a positive difference, but sugarcoating achievement data will only lead to greater problems down the road. The purpose of examining "real-time data" is to glean up-to-date information that provides insights or adjustments to instructional delivery to better determine what is working and what is not working, and to ultimately prevent student failure.

Toxic Waste

Each team member should enter the team setting with a positive attitude and with the understanding that collaborative efforts can lead to positive responses and actions. On occasion, a team member may falter and it becomes apparent to other team members that the individual is bringing the team down by spending time complaining, griping, blaming or finger pointing thus resulting in a waste of meeting time. In a careful and productive manner, the team must address the negative behavior so that the "toxicity" does not continue and eventually hinder the team's progress.

Over-programming

When individuals are over-programmed, they might not be getting enough sleep, they have health issues, they experience anxiety, and they feel under stress. We all realize that we cannot serve our students well when we are not at our best. I can think of no greater service that teammates can provide for one another than to look out for signs of over-programming and then come to a teammate's rescue. Supports may come in different forms such as socializing during off-school hours, covering a fellow teacher's class, duplicating instructional materials, and simply asking, "How can I help?"

I recently heard a song from the musical *Wicked* and as I listened to the lyrics I realized that they fit perfectly with the messages conveyed in this newsletter. The lyrics of "For Good" capture the power of what a collaborative team can accomplish. You might consider purchasing the song and play it at team meeting. The song is an example of musical artistry just as a team's collaboration is a work of educational artistry.

I close this newsletter with a recommendation. *Creating a Culture for Learning*, written collaboratively by several Just ASK Consultants, including me, can serve as an excellent resource to support learning communities in their work. Topics addressed in the book include communication skills, successful collaborative practices, ways to promote professional learning, and the gathering, analysis, and use of data. The book also includes multiple examples of schools that have achieved success in their collaborative efforts as well as templates that can support the work of teams and of the school as a professional learning community.

The authors of *Creating a Culture for Learning*



From left to right: Theresa West, Sherri Stephens-Carter, Bruce Oliver, Paula Rutherford, Julie McVicker, Brenda Kaylor, and Heather Clayton Kwit

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