

## Establishing Collective Commitments to Enhance the Effectiveness of Teams

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A reluctance to change their traditional classroom practices is not the only reason educators tend to drift away from substantive conversations about teaching and learning if parameters are not in place to guide their work. Conversations about the trivial are safer. If teachers are to work collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses and grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective. After all, you were hired for your professional expertise, but what if the results from a common assessment demonstrate that while students taught by your colleagues are successful, your students are not? We have seen evidence that some teachers would prefer not to know their strengths and weaknesses in relation to their colleague's because it is not worth the risk of being exposed and vulnerable.

In his review of the dysfunctions of a team, Patrick Lencioni (2003) contends that the first and most important step in building a cohesive and high-performing team is the establishment of vulnerability-based trust. Individuals on effective teams learn to acknowledge mistakes, weaknesses, failures, and the need for help. They also learn to recognize and value the strengths of other members of the team and are willing to learn from one another.

Putting people in groups does not ensure a productive, positive experience for participants. Most educators can remember a time when they worked in a group that was painfully inefficient and excruciatingly ineffective. But teams increase their likelihood of performing at high levels when they clarify their expectations of one another regarding procedures, responsibilities, and relationships.

All groups establish norms—"ground rules or habits that govern the group" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 173)—regardless of whether or not they take the time to reflect upon and articulate the norms they prefer for their team. But when individuals work through a process to create explicitly stated norms, and then commit to honor those norms, they increase the likelihood they will begin to function as a collaborative team rather than as a loose collection of people working together.

Team norms are not intended to serve as rules, but rather as collective commitments: public agreements shared among the members (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Effective teams do not settle for "sorta" agreements; they identify the very specific commitments members have made to each other.

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