

Developing and Leading a Collaborative School Culture

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As leaders we are acutely aware that schools need collaboration in every area for the school to function to the highest standard. Schools, teachers and indeed management in the past worked in isolation. While we are consistently improving and have come a long way, it is a challenge for school leaders to create a collaborative environment of professional collaboration where school staff are working together, collectively developing and sharing expertise. In this article I will explore the reasons why and how we as school leaders need to develop a collaborative school culture, review advice on leading teams and discuss ways of collaborating in schools.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DEVELOP & LEAD A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE?

In the document Looking at our Schools (LAOS) 2016, Domain 4 depicts the standard needed for collaborative practice in schools:

- *Teacher's value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration*
- *Teachers work together to devise learning opportunities for students across and beyond the curriculum*
- *Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices*
- *Teachers contribute to building whole staff capacity by sharing their expertise*

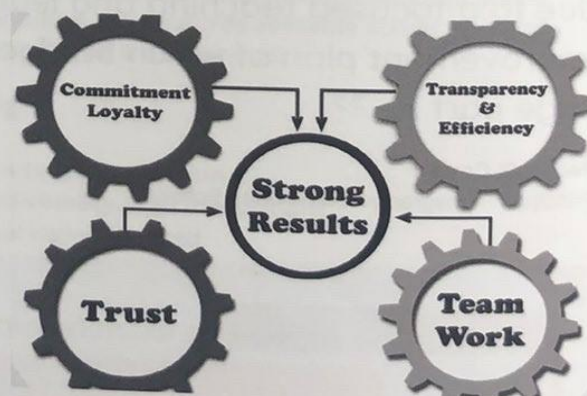
LAOS 2016 also states in The Statements of Practice – Leadership and Management that it is the school's senior leader's responsibility to '**Promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment**'.

When I asked a group of teachers why they felt it is important to develop a collaborative culture they gave me examples from their point of view displayed in the diagram across. Wellbeing of the teacher was a dominant feature along with reflection, diversity of thought, trust building and improving teaching & learning.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

If we want to create a collaborative culture, then we first need to know what culture is. In layman's terms it's 'the way we do

things around here'! Knowledge of the school culture is a prerequisite for leading change. Culture can be described as the set of key values, beliefs, understandings, and norms shared by members of an organisation and which guide their work and practices. Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual – a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization. (Kilmann et al., 1985)



LEADING A CULTURE OF CHANGE

The Four Pillars for Nurturing a Positive Staff Culture by Madden.J (2017) are needed for a collaborative environment. There needs to be a strong commitment & loyalty to create a culture of change, transparency & efficiency are paramount, teamwork is essential and a high level of trust is vital. In order to build a culture of trust you must show you care, take an interest, be consistent (do what you say you will do) and demonstrate competence (be good at what you do), show vulnerability and compassion. Relationships are key to creating a culture of change, so much so that Michael Fullan dedicated

an entire chapter 'Relationships, Relationships, Relationships' in his book 'Leading a Culture of change'. Humans are social beings that like to look after others and thrive on sacrificing for others. An environment of trust and co-operation is needed where people feel safe and secure. The correct environment and approach will allow the culture of change to develop with ease.

TEAMWORK

Teamwork is the foundation for collaborative practice. Katzenbach describes the four C's in teamwork - all four play a vital role in teams working efficiently and to the highest standard.

What's needed to make teams successful?

- Clearly defined goals and outcomes creating a common purpose
- All members focused on outcomes building commitment
- Clear delegation of tasks and roles through effective communication
- Strengths and weaknesses compensate for each other... complementary skills/roles
- Good spirit and climate (a bit of fun)
- Organised and structured approach... meeting, etc
- Risk-taking attitude - creative/innovative solutions



(Katzenbach, 1998)

Belbin, 1981, describes the roles people take on when working in a team. It is mindful when leading teams that not all members may demonstrate each role but, perhaps, they may have a number of them. All are needed for teams to work effectively, the key to leading teams is for each to work harmoniously and to keep conflict minimal.

- **Plant**
 - Creative and imaginative, unorthodox at times
- **Resource linker**
 - Develops contacts
- **Co-ordinator**
 - Organiser and delegator
- **Shaper**
 - Thrives on challenges/stress
 - Gets going when the going gets tough
- **Monitor/evaluator**
 - Sober and strategic

- **Team-worker**
 - The drone!
 - Needs the team
- **Implementer**
 - Efficient/turns ideas into action
- **Completer/finisher**
 - Searches for errors
 - Delivers on time
- **Specialist**
 - Narrow focus and contribution

Leading Teams

In my experience of leading teams there are eight key insights to lead successful teams:

- Delegation depends on belief in people rather than skills
- Clear, agreed objective for the delegated role
- Assign the role and make sure it is clearly understood
- Provide support through training and in-service if necessary
- Be available to offer guidance and support without undue interference. Empower others to make decisions
- Agree standards required
- Agree on a reporting system
- Evaluate performance and identify lessons learned

For teams to be successful you as the leader need to walk the walk with them. Dictatorial or boss-like characteristics will not bring people with you. Nobody likes being told what to do. I view the leader of a team as someone walking the walk, right in the middle of the team, leading it in the direction it needs to go. When meeting teams I make sure to take a job to do as well as everyone else but I have the vision for where I want to take the team and what I want the team to achieve.

Goal setting and planning is very important in leading teams. The SMART rule should be adhered to: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based

If everyone knows where they stand, where the project is going and how long is given for it, it will go in the direction needed.

When leading teams, how do you cope with conflict management?

Due to varying roles, personalities, and a high level of interdependency in teams it is essential as a leader you can manage conflict. Conflict can be difficult to lead and experience can serve you well but the following tips are what is recommended:

- Listen and do not interrupt, the person often just needs to be listened to to diffuse the situation
- Distraction can help diffusion
- Keep listening and probing - "tell me more"
- Acknowledge points of agreement, feelings and empathise "I can see where you are coming from"
- If you are wrong APOLOGISE - we all make mistakes, an apology goes a long way
- If it is not to do with you, stay out of it and don't take sides
- If you are stressed or put under pressure do not make decisions - ask for time to decide - "can you leave it with me to think about it?"
- Speak to others to help you decipher a solution to it
- Always address the problem, don't ignore or leave without action as this will add further to the upset

Once you have collaboration how do you keep momentum?

Northhouse, 2015, states that a constructive climate builds performance of a team. In other words, if people feel supported, appreciated and encouraged in their role the momentum will be sustained. Materialistic rewards such as money, bonuses or vouchers are not what motivates. People want to feel appreciated and valued. If satisfaction in the collaborative environment is felt then there will be a focus on achieving their best.

The Out-Group: I have painted a very rosy picture of the perfect collaborative environment, but we must mention "The Out-Group" as they are in every school! Northhouse 2015 describes them as the group that do not identify with the larger, they work against the community aspect and synergy of the group.

So how do we bring them along and get them engaged in the collaborative environment that we are tirelessly aiming to achieve? It is important to listen to all and believe that everyone has something to contribute. The Out-Group's existence is inevitable, however they deserve to be recognised and respected. There are many reasons for their existence both personal and professional. Their history needs to be taken into account (such as previous experiences), their values and beliefs may differ, they may experience shared experiences/needs with others, they may have experienced exclusion from being part of cultural/ethnic groups or it may be due to lack of communication and social skills. Once the reasons why are understood, accommodation can be attempted.

Strategies used to accommodate members of the out group:

1. Listen
2. Show empathy
3. Demonstrate communication techniques – restate, recognise, paraphrase, acknowledge, reflect, connect, support, reassure
4. Recognise their potential and unique contributions – they can be a creative leader
5. Help them in feeling included – we all want to belong!
6. Create a special relationship with members – you do it with others!
7. Give them a voice and empower them to act

In order to lead teams and create a collaborative culture emotional intelligence is needed

Components of Emotional Intelligence

- **Self-Awareness:** knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, drives, values and impacts on others. Self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, self-depreciation, sense of humour, thirst for constructive criticism
- **Self-Regulation:** controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods. Trustworthy & integrity, comfortable with ambiguity & change

- **Motivation:** relishing achievement for its own sake, passionate about the work, optimistic, desire to improve and committed to the organisation
- **Empathy:** understanding other's emotional makeup, Expert with retaining commitment from staff, sensitivity to cross cultural differences. Ability to develop capacity in others and students
- **Social Skills:** building rapport and moving people in desired direction. Effective in leading change, persuasive, good networker, expertise in building and leading teams

The role of technology in developing a collaborative school culture

Most of what I have covered in this article relates to human relations and dealing with people. I cannot conclude the article without mentioning the role of technology in providing a platform for collaboration.

Technology will never be a replacement for human touch but it helps with organisation and sharing/editing of documents thus creating a more collaborative environment. There are multiple technology platforms to use in a school setting such as Microsoft Teams, Google Drive, One Drive, One Note, Compass, Vsware, Schoolwise etc. The debate is ongoing as to whether one outperforms the other but we are all in agreement that they enhance a collaborative culture in schools.

Best practice of collaboration in schools

In order to have a high level of collaboration in schools there needs to be facilitation, time and space. The level of collaboration in schools depends on the prevailing school culture of teachers, students and the whole school community, the mix of characters in the school community whether they are introverts or extroverts, the focus or purpose of projects or tasks being undertaken and the level of creativity and innovation required for change.

In my eyes a school with a high level of collaboration, what we are all striving for, is one where Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are present allowing for professional conversations, Teacher Peer Observation (TPO) is common with teachers allowing other teachers into their classrooms and sharing best practice, Continuous Professional Developments (CPD) is internal, where teachers share their expertise with others thereby developing the learning organisation, perhaps through staff rotations, Action Research (AR) is utilised in cycles of planning, implementing and reflecting, school staff should be encouraged to be reflective practitioners responsible for their own learning.

To conclude:

Schools vary on the level of collaboration but as school leaders we have a responsibility to create a culture of collaboration amongst our staff. It's important to reflect on and assess where your school is at. Taking small steps towards the end goal will get you there in the end.