

Staying the Course: A High School Department Sails toward Collaboration

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During the summer of 2000, our school district trained its leaders in the principles of the Adaptive School (Garmston and Wellman, 1999). Our workshop leaders, Bob Garmston and Jane Ellison, guided us through a series of activities, illustrating both the principles of collaboration and the methods through which such principles might be implemented. On the third day of training during a coffee break, two teachers from our English department, Jane and Judy, approached me. "We need to do this," Jane asserted. "We've got to do something to improve our meetings." I realized that we could achieve such a goal only if our members embraced it. "Will you help?" I asked.

EMBRACING CHANGE: In the first meeting of our group of 27 teachers, we briefly shared important principles from the summer. For example, meetings should exist for the group, not for the leader, and a successful meeting is one in which much work is done quickly with maximum satisfaction. Jane asked department members if they were interested in making this project a major goal for the year, and they adopted it unanimously. Teachers also brainstormed ways to improve meetings and selected three upon which to focus: involving the staff in the development of agenda, embracing conflict without getting emotional, and reducing the ritual of meetings. In retrospect, our decision to enroll people in the goal was critical, for in the first few months our project did not go well. Some members of the department, particularly those who had dominated prior meetings, were very critical of our efforts. Also, our facilitators were learning on the fly, and their inexperience sometimes showed. That we had adopted the goal, however, required us to sustain our efforts, for going back was not an option.

A sign that change was beginning showed immediately at our first meeting, for it was held in a new location, not in the classroom we had used for almost twenty years. The movement to a new room required members of our department to relocate within the space and interrupted familiar grouping patterns. Other immediate changes included a new agenda format, expanded use of small groups,

and flip-chart recording. Two teachers who had not participated in the summer workshop joined our facilitation team, and their involvement further demonstrated the department's commitment to its goal.

INQUIRING INTO ASSUMPTIONS AND PREFERENCES: At our second meeting, a facilitator asked why the department meets monthly and what teachers hope to accomplish at each meeting. Some teachers believed that meetings were held to support teachers and reduce their feelings of isolation. Such meetings were intended to inspire, rejuvenate, and leave teachers feeling reaffirmed as professionals. Another group of teachers believed that meetings were intended to challenge the thinking of the group. Meetings afforded these teachers opportunities to voice concerns and resolve community frustrations. The difference in these views is striking, for the very purposes outlined by one group appear to undermine the achievement of the other's. In our department, the conflict between these views had manifested itself in very defined patterns of behavior. Participation at meetings was limited to about a third of the teachers, and in most cases, teachers who enjoyed debate dominated conversation.

Realizing the dichotomy in teachers' assumptions encouraged me to examine my own practices as leader. I had developed a set of habits that permitted us to function, but not all practices were good. I usually opened meetings with informational items, but sometimes allowed these items to consume too much time. I also delayed difficult items, preferring to stay on more positive topics. Often, debate began late, and I intervened regularly to reduce interpersonal conflict. I remember at times feeling like a weary prizefighter, hoping for rescue by the bell.

Our facilitation team gained perspective on our problem in the two types of communication described by Garmston and Wellman. In dialogue, group members listen to one another with a goal to understand. In discussion, they listen to one another with goal to reach a decision. We realized that some agenda items were intended to provide opportunities for dialogue and understanding while others required us to negotiate decisions. Our challenge, we realized, was to insure that our members understood our purposes at every point in the meeting and matched their communication behaviors to our purposes. In this respect, I realized that not all my habits were ineffective. Meetings included both elements of dialogue and discussion, and we shared ideas with one another as often as we tackled difficult issues.

SUPPORTING NEW LEADERS: During the first semester, our facilitation team addressed the department's goal to involve its members in planning agendas. The team met a few days before meetings to unpack possible items, asking why people needed to meet, and more importantly, wondering if an item could generate meaningful two-way conversation. If the purpose were dialogue, what value would teachers find in the conversation? If an item would result in a decision, what role would teachers have in the decision-making process? In assessing agenda items,

teacher- facilitators were keenly intuitive. “Drop the in-service item,” they’d say, “And cover it in a memo. Just distribute the assessment data; we talked about it last year. Drop the dress-code dialogue; it’s a one-person issue. Extend the conversation about department goals.” With the help of facilitators, agendas concentrated on a few items, and opportunities for extended dialogue increased significantly.

The team also brainstormed ways of involving the department in each item. Here we worked closely with the strategies in *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (1999). Our goals were to widen involvement and increase positive interaction, and we adopted processes that supported these goals. Early on, facilitators expressed nervousness in their new roles, and so in planning meetings we imagined our conversations, sketching out each segment of the meeting. Still, in the immediacy of facilitation, our team members sometimes forgot their plans. We responded to this situation by developing detailed guides. In early efforts, we generated a narrative description around each item, clarifying our outcomes, planning our time, and explaining the processes to be followed. Later, we developed a set of speaker points. On the topic of future computer use, for example, a facilitator outlined our current availability, clarified the reasons for raising the question, and noted that our decision would be advisory to the Associate Principal. She also clarified the timeline for implementation. Speaker points proved to be much more effective than narrative scripts and much less clumsy in meetings. In the hands of strong facilitators, notes disappeared completely.

Our decision to use speaker points, however, made me uncomfortable. As chair with release time to perform department responsibilities, I drafted speaker points, yet I worried that I would seem too controlling. Facilitators expressed no such reservations, for they had collaborated with me in planning sessions, but a few department members noticed my effect. After one early meeting, in an evaluation, a teacher wrote, “I continue to like a couple of department members leading the meeting, though they still seem to be looking to Pat for some direction or assurance-still seems in control.” As facilitators became more comfortable with speaker points and learned to step away from them, my hand in meetings became less noticeable. I also learned to strip speaker points down to essentials. Interestingly, I did not feel displaced by the transfer of responsibilities to facilitators. Rather, I felt freed from the need to worry about the details of the meeting.

Our facilitation team continued its efforts throughout the year, and late in the year, we surveyed teachers regarding their feelings. They overwhelmingly supported our facilitators. Their efforts alone, teachers believed, increased the spirit of collaboration within the department. One teacher explained, “I appreciated the peer participation in the format. I believe it as an excellent means for all to see the issue, not the chair.” In meetings in April and May, our facilitation team invited other members of the department to serve as facilitators, and our current plans have us involving a guest facilitator at each meeting.

BUILDING TRUST IN NEW METHODS: A particular problem surfaced in our team's efforts to record meetings on flip charts. Though our team intended charts to represent the ongoing thinking of the department, teachers felt the process was intrusive, taking too much time away from talking and drawing too much attention to itself. Indeed, some teachers couldn't stop watching recorders. Part of the problem could be traced to our audience of English teachers, who worried about the language used to translate our thoughts, and part of it to our recorders who were still learning to record. Still, by the second month, several teachers were advocating that we abandon flip charts altogether. In situations such as this one, our team resisted the impulse to return to past methods. Instead, we modified our practice, becoming more thoughtful and selective in our application of new methods. Record keeping, we realized, was most useful in brainstorming situations. In these contexts, teachers didn't notice recorders, and after a while the process became natural.

REMAINING PRODUCTIVE AMID CHANGE: As we approached December, members of our department became open in expressing their criticisms of our team's efforts. Our meetings had become a matter of making lists, which appeared to prevent genuine dialogue. "Our energy has been totally sapped," one teacher wrote in an evaluation, "as we list and watch ideas being written down." Another teacher felt that our conversations had become "stilted" and "unnatural." Even our supporters were uneven in their praise. "I liked the discussion about the purposes of our meetings; however, I'm not really sure what we got done." In our planning meeting in December, we were disheartened by such criticisms. We shared our concerns with Bob Garmston, who had returned to consult our team, and he explained our problem as one of emphasis. In our efforts to illustrate the principles of effective collaboration and meeting design, we had placed too much emphasis on production capacity and not enough on production itself. Our meetings were filled with motion, but not achievement, and in our efforts to demonstrate effective strategies, we had overused them. "Slow down," Bob advised, "and get back to important work."

Fortunately, important work awaited us in December in the form a new state assessment, and our team realized that our next meeting might make or break us. In our initial plan completed before the meeting, we had placed equal emphasis upon the new state assessment and on the strategies we had learned during the summer. After meeting with Bob, we completely revised our emphases. The state assessment was the work that mattered, and we would illustrate principles only on occasion.

Though our desire to change overnight surely contributed to our problems, our choice of settings also undermined our effectiveness. After-school meetings on the first Thursday of every month simply couldn't provide a proper context for our work. If we wanted a fair chance, we needed our teachers fresh, our facilitators focused, and our time together extended. In December, we found such time in an all-day in-service.

PLANNING FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FOR GROUPS: A facilitator opened our in-service day with a brief assessment activity, inviting teachers to assess their strengths in the seven norms of collaboration (Garmston and Wellman, 1999) and to select one norm as a personal goal for the day. Our team has learned that teachers are familiar with many of the principles of collaboration and a simple reminder is sufficient to set a meaningful and personal objective for a meeting. Even as we begin meetings with a focus on the individual, we also plan ways to organize individuals meaningfully into groups. How can people be grouped to bring different perspectives or skills to a topic? At our December meeting, a facilitator guided teachers through an inclusion activity. Since our workshop involved several partner activities, teachers completed a seasonal partner graphic, identifying four people with whom to collaborate. To insure that partnerships represented diversity, teachers selected a teacher from a different office (winter), a teacher of different courses (spring), a teacher from the same grade level (summer), and a teacher collaborator (fall). The activity forced movement and interaction, speeded up transitions between activities, and most importantly, created logical pairings for the work that followed.

FREEING UP LEADERS AND FINDING NEW ONES: In one segment of the workshop, I introduced teachers to the three segments of the Illinois Prairie State Examination. In my duties as chair, I had attended several training sessions, which made me an authority on the tests. One of the most refreshing aspects of the adaptive school model is the way it frees its leaders to perform important roles. Here I led the session, sharing my knowledge. Later in the meeting, I could share my opinions on how best to prepare students for the new tests. Not acting as facilitator, I could become a participant in discussions. In another segment of the workshop teachers divided into four grade-level teams and developed lists of instructional experiences that were currently preparing students for the tests. Not surprisingly, teachers shared many ideas and discovered they were already doing much to prepare students. An attendant benefit of this activity was that it revealed our natural leaders, those teachers who had expertise in the area and could provide knowledge and support for all of us. In the days after the workshop, two teachers spearheaded collaborative efforts on our test preparation program.

ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS: At one point in the workshop, a facilitator asked teachers to answer the following questions in six small groups. What is my relationship to tests such as the Prairie State? How have they influenced my teaching in the past? How do I feel about them? In these conversations, teachers revealed their feelings. Some teachers deeply resented the tests for they felt they were intruding upon the curriculum? Others expressed frustration with the difficulty of the tests. Still others talked about their instructional practices. It was as if we were saying that it was okay to be frustrated by the tests and their effects upon us. Our department has used grounding activities often since December, and we have discovered that they are always helpful. Rather than allow negative feelings and attitudes to undermine the effectiveness of the group, grounding activities allow such

emotions and beliefs to rise to the top, where we can all acknowledge them. Most of us disliked state tests, and saying so publicly helped us face the realities that we still needed to prepare students for them.

THINKING ABOUT TEXT AND CONTEXT: Prior to developing a course of action, teachers reviewed an outstanding test preparation program developed at a neighboring high school. They admired parts of the program and disliked others, but this school's work served as a springboard for us to develop our own plan. Working from a text, whether a detailed plan or a simple graphic, provides groups with a starting place. Yet knowing where to begin is not enough to set direction. A group must also understand the scope of its possibilities. In December, a facilitator clarified our decision-making process. In our case, the district had asked the department to be deliberate in its investigation of the new test and in the development of strategies to prepare students for it. The department could determine the scope, content and duration of the plan. This clarity helped teachers realize that we controlled our own destinies. When they then brainstormed, clarified, advocated for, and selected courses of action, they did so in a positive spirit.

MONITORING EFFECTIVENESS: At the conclusion of the December meeting, we asked teachers to assess the day. One wrote, "I think we worked in the most collaborative manner I have seen in a long time. The atmosphere was friendly, comfortable, and yet serious. We all seemed together." Another teacher wrote, "We listened and were positive, respectful, and thoughtful." A third wrote, "I think the fact that we had a common goal (the Prairie State test) really helped us to collaborate." Not all meetings received such positive response, but our facilitation team learned to appreciate all types of response. We listened carefully to teachers' concerns, pinpointed areas where our methods were failing or misunderstood, and adjusted our practices. As we reported results to teachers and explained how comments had effected changes in our methods, teachers became more thorough and more thoughtful in their feedback. Our assessments were not long, nor time-consuming. We identified but one or two questions after each meeting and designated five minutes for response.

CHANGING SEAMLESSLY: On the negative side, teachers worried that our meetings were too structured. One teacher suggested that our highly structured meetings were "too much of a restraint in terms of open dialogue." At the same time, this teacher wrote, "Yet the sense of sharing of ideas in a 'safer,' less hostile environment was appreciated." Other teachers also criticized our meetings as too structured, wondering if teachers would have raised other issues if they could. We realized that our meetings plans had reduced spontaneity, and so our team became less elaborate in our agenda formats.

Our team also learned not to spell out the details of our meetings. While meetings very much resembled lesson plans with behavioral objectives, teachers were made uncomfortable if we made such similarities explicit. Other teacher disliked timed

agendas, believing time indicators “stifled” some talk, but rather than eliminating timed segments, we simply reduced our specificity. In speaker notes, we micro-managed time, identifying two or three goals to accomplish in a half-hour conversation. For teachers, however, we listed only the topic and thirty minutes.

Other teachers reacted negatively to some of our strategies, calling them “gimmicks.” The seasonal partner activity, for example, was a highly effective means to organize people into work groups, yet some teachers felt as if they were back in junior high. We discovered that we could try but one or two new approaches at a meeting, for to do more was to draw too much attention to our process. New approaches, however, became familiar after the first time and rarely generated response from teachers. Again, we remembered Bob Garmston’s words: “Go slowly.”

DECIDING WHAT’S NEGOTIABLE: One of the department’s goals was to reduce the ritual of our meetings, and this goal was very difficult to accomplish. In our school, departments are required to meet monthly, and for many years our department had met on Thursday afternoons. In our revised schedule, every third meeting was held on an in-service day, and one meeting each semester concluded after an hour so that our department might adjourn to a local restaurant. Even with different agenda formats and meeting locations, some members of the department reacted to the sameness of our meetings. Several wanted to hold meetings before school, and on this issue, I was unwilling to waver. I invited teachers to visit other departments and to report on the effectiveness of morning meetings. In our school, late arrivals, early departures, and minimal interaction plagued such meetings. At times, I believe, leaders must communicate to a group what cannot be changed.

BRINGING THE OLD ALONG WITH THE NEW: Perhaps the most interesting problem we faced involved our use of small groups. In meeting evaluations, many teachers believed that we overused them. Our reasons for relying on small groups were many. First, we wanted to open communication within the department, and groups provided us with a means to create conversations among people who didn’t often talk. Also we wanted to hear from some of our quieter members, for in prior years, we often heard more from them after meetings than during them. We also realized that small groups reduced hostility, and while this emotion occurred infrequently in our meetings, it had occurred. Unfortunately, in our efforts to accomplish these purposes, we forgot that our English teachers were masters of large-group communication. It was the principal form of interaction in our classrooms, and at our meetings teachers had long demonstrated a facility for talking together. Such talk was often passionate and eloquent, and teachers missed such interchanges. Our facilitation team needed to remember to retain processes that had proven effective in the past.

MONITORING ONESELF: Our solution to the small-group problem emerged in our March meeting. At that meeting we needed to decide whether to continue our local

speech and literature assessments. The topic was very divisive. The teachers who had created the instruments were members of our department and had long defended the validity of the tests. On the other hand, many teachers were tired of the tests and felt burdened by the administration of them. Facilitators had planned to divide the department into groups, but at the meeting teachers rebelled. "Why can't we just talk about it together," one teacher said. "We'll be good." Our facilitator allowed the large-group conversation, and teachers moved carefully and respectfully toward a collaborative decision. In our follow-up session, facilitators discussed this meeting. Within the phrase, "We'll be good," we found the reason for the success of the conversation. Effective collaboration requires a commitment by every staff member to monitor his or her own performance. It requires that we listen to one another, monitor our own actions, and presume that others are being positive in their efforts. For years, I had felt responsible for the actions of teachers at our meetings and tried to control them. Today I realize that no leader can accomplish such a goal. Effective collaboration begins when individuals assume responsibility for and control of their own behaviors.

STUMBLING AND GETTING UP: Our efforts to restructure department meetings and modify our ways of talking together have not been easy. As a leader I had to let go, and our facilitators had to step up. Our success, I believe, was largely caused by our facilitators, who showed such courage and determination, even in the face of criticism. We realize that we have a long way to go to achieve the sense of unity we desire in our department, but we have learned a good deal in our first year and face the future with assurance.

References

Garmston, R and Wellman, B. *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon Publishers, 1999.