

# STRONG TEAMS, STRONG SCHOOLS

TEACHER-TO-TEACHER COLLABORATION CREATES SYNERGY THAT BENEFITS STUDENTS

By Dennis Sparks

*If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.* — African proverb

*You must undertake something so great that you cannot accomplish it unaided.* — Phillips Brooks

Schools rise and fall based on the quality of the teamwork that occurs within their walls. Well-functioning leadership and teaching teams are essential to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. That is particularly true when schools have clearly articulated, stretching aspirations for the learning of all their students. Effective teams strengthen leadership, improve teaching and learning, nurture relationships, increase job satisfaction, and provide a means for mentoring and supporting new teachers and administrators.

Schools will improve for the benefit of every student only when every leader and every teacher is a member of



one or more strong teams that create synergy in problem solving, provide emotional and practical support, distribute leadership to better tap the talents of members of the school community, and promote the interpersonal accountability that is necessary for continuous improvement. Such teamwork not only benefits students, it also creates the “supportive leadership” and the process and time for meaningful collaboration that enable teachers to thrive and are better able to address the complex challenges of their work.

In *Leading for Results* (Sparks, 2007), I wrote: “A widely held view of instructional improvement is that good teaching is primarily an individual affair and that principals who view themselves as instructional leaders promote it by interacting one-on-one with each teacher to strengthen his or her efforts in the classroom. The principal is like the hub of a wheel with teachers at the end of each spoke. Communication about instruction moves back and forth along the spoke to the hub but not around the circumference of the wheel.”

Such a form of instructional leadership, however, fails to tap the most important source of instructional improve-



ment in schools — teacher-to-teacher professional learning and collaboration. “[S]ome of the most important forms of professional learning,” I observed in *Leading for Results*, “occur in daily interactions among teachers in which they assist one another in improving lessons, deepening understanding of the content they teach, analyzing student work, examining various types of data on student performance, and solving the myriad of problems they face each day.”

### DEFINING EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK

Simply labeling a group of people a team (or a professional learning community) rather than a committee or task force does not, however, make it a genuine team. To address this issue, the Rush-Henrietta Central School District near Rochester, N.Y., developed a rubric based on Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002) (see box above) to enable it to better understand teamwork and to chart the district’s progress in developing effective teams. (See “Key characteristics of effective teams” on p. 30.)

The Rush-Henrietta rubric lists four key characteristics: clarity of purpose, accountability, team structure, and trust.

Each key characteristic is defined by a number of indicators. For instance, indicators of effective team structures include “uses protocols to help guide the group work and provide a consistent framework” and “has agreements in place that are clear, purposeful, and understood.” Accountability asks team members to be “committed to decisions and plans of actions” and asks them to “hold one another accountable for delivering against the plans agreed to and feel a sense of obligation to the team for its progress.”

A starting point for teams is to assess the quality of teamwork in your setting using the Rush-Henrietta rubric, the team assessment provided by Patrick Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, or other tools you may have available to you. Better yet, to stimulate professional learning and teamwork, develop a rubric with your team using the Rush-Henrietta document as a starting point. You may want to make separate assessments for the leadership team of which you are a part and teacher instructional teams, which may go by other names like “professional learning community.”

### REFERENCES

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

**Sparks, D. (2007).** *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

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### Lencioni’s 5 dysfunctions of a team

- Inattention to results.
- Avoidance of accountability.
- Lack of commitment.
- Fear of conflict.
- Absence of trust.

**Source:** Lencioni, 2002.

## Key characteristics of effective teams

<b>Starting out</b> Acquiring information and beginning to use ideas.	<b>Developing</b> Experimenting with strategies and building on initial commitment.	<b>Deepening</b> Well on the way, having achieved a degree of mastery and feeling the benefits.	<b>Sustaining</b> Introducing new developments and re-evaluating quality have become a way of life.
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KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS	Starting out	Developing	Deepening	Sustaining
<b>CLARITY OF PURPOSE</b>				
<b>In a team with clarity of purpose:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are clearly defined, transparent goals aligned with the mission and vision of the district.</li> <li>• All team members are committed to these goals and to a clearly articulated plan of action.</li> <li>• Goals are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART).</li> <li>• There is shared clarity about how the work of the team will affect student achievement.</li> </ul>				
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY</b>				
<b>A team focused on accountability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is committed to decisions and plans of action.</li> <li>• Holds one another accountable for delivering against the plans agreed to and feels a sense of obligation to the team for its progress.</li> <li>• Focuses on the achievement of collective results for student learning.</li> <li>• Reviews, studies, interprets, and acts on data.</li> <li>• Willingly reviews its progress, can describe its work to others, and welcomes feedback and suggestions.</li> <li>• Identifies potential problems quickly by questioning one another's approaches without hesitation.</li> <li>• Engages in formal monitoring of progress on SMART goals.</li> </ul>				
<b>TEAM STRUCTURE</b>				
<b>A team with effective team structures:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has observable processes in action when the team is working and meeting.</li> <li>• Has defined roles and responsibilities for members; however, the roles and responsibilities can and should be shared.</li> <li>• Uses protocols to help guide group work and provide a consistent framework.</li> <li>• Has agreements in place that are clear, purposeful, and understood. These agreements drive meetings, the intent being to maximize time and efficiency.</li> <li>• Has an identified facilitator, as well as secondary facilitators, who keep the team focused on the goals. Meetings have a start and end time, as well as an agenda.</li> <li>• Has an understanding of how decisions will be made.</li> <li>• Engages regularly in reflection on the content and process of team meetings and celebrates progress.</li> </ul>				
<b>TRUST</b>				
<b>Members of trusting teams:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have discussions, with the encouragement of different viewpoints, about how to reach goals. Team members have the courage to share their viewpoint, even if it varies from the majority of the group. Team members are open-minded, listen, and give colleagues a chance to speak. Respectful dialogue is the norm.</li> <li>• Are able to engage in "unfiltered conflict" around ideas.</li> <li>• Admit weaknesses and mistakes and ask for help.</li> <li>• Accept questions and input about their areas of responsibility.</li> <li>• Give one another the benefit of the doubt before arriving at a negative conclusion.</li> <li>• Take risks in offering feedback and assistance.</li> <li>• Appreciate and tap into one another's skills and experiences.</li> <li>• Offer and accept apologies without hesitation.</li> <li>• Look forward to meetings and opportunities to work as a group.</li> </ul>				

Portions adapted from: Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Source: Rush-Henrietta Central School District.