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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, EdD

Structures: The Building Blocks of Collaboration

"Professional Learning Communities require organizational structures and supports to be successful." -Supovitz & Christman, 2003

According to Lewis and Kruse (1995), certain "structural conditions are necessary to build a frame that allows PLCs to operate effectively," thus, it's useful to understand how the right structures can promote collaboration in schools.

The most effective principals embrace structures such as a master schedule that provides time for teams to meet during the regular school day. Other structures found in highly collaborative schools include the regular and routine use of protocols to promote richer conversations about instructional strategies, team norms to manage people's behavior resulting in more effective team meetings, and common assessments to generate data about teaching and learning. To understand how structure impacts collaboration, there are five key points to remember about structure.

First, structure should maximize a school's resources. The best way to understand how structure promotes collaboration is to focus first on how a resource might enhance or inhibit the effectiveness of collaborative teams. Once that initial question is asked and answered, a structure(s) can be designed to maximize the positive effect of a resource(s) on collaboration.

Second, structure reflects a school's priorities. The fastest way to identify what is important to a faculty is to look at the structures that a school employs. The structures that a school designs and supports make a statement about what that faculty values.

Third, structure evolves as a school's practice evolves. We must be able to articulate why a structure exists but structures can fall victim to the precedent of past practice. Too many schools continue to embrace outdated structures that do not support what we know is best practice simply because, "that's the way it's always been."

Fourth, schools control the structures in their school. Similar to the previous category, some may feel powerless to make changes and thus continue using outdated and ineffective structures or dismiss newer and more effective structures because, "that is out of our control." In many cases, putting the right structures in place simply requires a little creativity or fresh perspective.

And finally, the presence or absence of structure impacts collaboration. The right structure can encourage, facilitate and encourage collaboration. Likewise, the wrong structure will certainly discourage, inhibit, or derail a team's efforts to collaborate.

"As odd it sounds, simple, well-known strategies and structures drive improvement in any organization." -Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000

Structures maximize a school's resources. Schools that are most successful develop a structure(s) ***after*** understanding how a resource(s) will support collaboration.

Consider the many templates for meeting agendas. One of the most effective examples utilizes the four critical questions of learning to create a graphic organizer teams use when creating meeting agendas. (See agenda template at http://bit.ly/agendatemp). As potential topics for the meeting are suggested, an effort is made to categorize each topic under one of the four questions. If the topic does not fit in any of the four quadrants, it is not a topic for the collaborative team meeting. This type of agenda was specifically designed ***after*** understanding that helping teams focus on the four critical questions of learning would promote more effective team meetings.

Structures reflect a school's priorities. It doesn't take long; a quick review of the structures a school supports and implements illustrates what is valued at that school.

For example, if designated and protected time during the regular school day is not clearly evident on the master schedule, it cannot be argued that collaboration is a priority. On the other hand, when a school creates pyramids of intervention that allow students access to additional time and support without missing direct instruction in another core subject, they are demonstrating the importance they place on the belief that all students can learn given enough opportunities and the right instructional strategies. This same school might emphasize the routine use of protocols as a way to promote dialogue. On these teams, teachers value feedback from their peers around teaching and learning as a powerful way to improve their instructional practice. The use of protocols reflects the priority they place on the kind of conversations and dialogue that leads to openly sharing best practice.

Structures evolve as a school's practice evolves. Just as our understanding of what constitutes best practice continues to evolve, so too must a school's structures.

During the 1980s and 1990s many districts implemented the middle school concept. A conscious effort was made to create interdisciplinary teams by assigning one teacher from each subject area to a classroom in the same hallway. To this day, despite the fact that the benefits of the middle school model never fully materialized, teachers across the country are assigned to classrooms that reflect the structure of interdisciplinary teams. In contrast, the more effective schools organize teachers into content-alike teams and assign them to classrooms in close physical proximity to one another in order to facilitate collaboration. Clearly, the classroom to which a teacher is assigned can enhance or inhibit a team's efforts to collaborate and being cognizant of that illustrates how important it is for structure to evolve along with what we know is best practice.

The school controls the structures. Bob Eaker describes a visit to a comprehensive high school where the staff explained there simply wasn't time for collaboration inside the regular school day; he was told point blank that, "The schedule just wouldn't allow it."

Eaker asked if the school ever created alternative schedules to accommodate special circumstances such as assemblies, testing or sporting events. When given an entire notebook of alternative schedules Eaker asked, "What would happen if we changed the name of this schedule from 'Assembly Schedule' to 'Collaboration Schedule' or looked at repurposing the advisory period, or exploring a late start model as possibilities to support increased opportunities for teacher collaboration?" Obviously, the design of the school's master schedule was influencing the way, and for what purpose, time was allocated and just as a teacher's room assignment was within the control of the school, so too was the design of the master schedule.

Finally, the presence or absence of structure impacts collaboration. The absence of the right kinds of structure prevents schools from developing more collaborative cultures.

Most would agree that designated and protected time for teams during the regular school day enhances the effectiveness of team meetings. Likewise, there is little argument that reflecting on data from common assessments improves a teacher's instructional practice or that access to more time and support helps improve student learning. But, if the right structural conditions are missing or ineffective, teachers cannot leverage these powerful resources in ways that promote collaboration.

"Collaborative teams must carefully design the format of their work."- Mike Schmoker, 2001

Structure alone is insufficient but expecting teachers to collaborate without providing the necessary structures is a recipe for failure. According to Rick DuFour (2004), "Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create *structures* to promote a collaborative culture." ■

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