



Working in Teams

School communities are keen to explore ways of improving the system and environments in which their students learn. Identifying the appropriate school-based structure is a key factor in establishing the ideal setting for effective schooling. Effective schooling involves an open dialogue and collaboration among teachers, students, parents and community. This environment provides a great opportunity for working in teams.

Background

The concept of workplace teams has been promoted as a way to improve productivity and morale of workers for some years, if not decades. The formation of teams at schools and other education workplaces complements the notion of school-based management. This grassroots approach entrusts schools with making the decisions and the responsibility for carrying them out and learning from their experience. Central to this trust and responsibility is consultation with the parents, teachers, students and the wider community. Working in teams can improve the management of school issues and contribute to an effective learning or working environment.

What is a team?

There are many definitions of what a team is. In short, teams are essentially small groups of people who work together to achieve a shared and measurable goal. Effective teams discuss problems openly, gather the facts by consulting, develop solutions together, decide by consensus, support each other and share their successes.

What are the characteristics of an effective team?

Management support – for a team to be effective, the manager or principal needs to 'let go': to stand back and view the process from the sideline and avoid taking control. His or her job is to support the team in managing and putting into operation its own decisions. Management support is not about controlling or directing the team. Managers and principals need to support the team through open communication, sharing ideas, advice and providing development opportunities for team members.

Balance – an effective team can find a balance between achieving the task and managing the process to achieve the task. The task is simply the job at hand, that is, what do we need to do? The process is how the job is done, that is, how will we do this? Critical process issues for teams to determine are:

- communication processes;
- planning processes;
- processes for making decisions;
- processes for handling conflict.

It is mostly the lack of these process skills that makes teams inefficient.

Complementary skills – teams involve the combination of a group of diverse people with various ideas and different

skills. An important characteristic of an effective team is the grouping of people with the resources and skills to provide a blend of attributes that permit the job to proceed in the best way.

Common purpose – this is the driving force of teams. This purpose must be meaningful, link directly to the task at hand and be owned by all. The team needs to know why it exists and where it is heading.

Established goals – specific goals must be established, tracked, met and evaluated in a continuing process. Goals help the team to focus on performance (task) and teamwork (process). These goals will enable team members to identify their roles and responsibilities.

What are the benefits of teams?

- Working in teams enables more people to be involved in making a decision and with this comes a greater likelihood that the decision will be implemented.
- More useful information and actions come from people working in a team.
- Teams build stronger relationships among those involved in education and ultimately benefit students because having more people with broader perspectives helps to shape a stronger educational program.
- Stronger relationships established through a team-based approach improve and maintain a supportive school and work environment.
- Working in teams can provide a beneficial learning and development opportunity for members. Teamwork often goes hand-in-hand with peer learning, which is a sound learning strategy.
- Significant change is brought about by staff and community participation in project planning and implementation.

Action

There is plenty of evidence to suggest teams are an effective way to manage work at schools and in organisations. The critical question that management and staff grapple with is where to start.

Where do we start?

The place to start is a commitment and belief that teams are an appropriate way to manage work. There is the old adage that **Belief = Action = Results!**

The principal or manager is a key figure in school or workplace improvement and the school or work unit is the primary unit of change. One, hopefully both, of these sources needs to drive and advocate the team agenda at the school or workplace.

What next?

Discuss – talk about the concept and process at staff meetings to gain consensus.

Identify pilot project – identify a key project that can be used to try out the team approach. Explain the key outcomes and establish a project team.

Time and resources – the team needs the time and resources to be able to complete the project successfully and time to clear any blockages that occur in the process.

Learning and development – research has shown that a critical factor is the need to develop staff in team processes.

Promote – during the project it is important to promote team and work successes to all stakeholders.

Celebrate – outcomes, mistakes and benefits of the team project need to be celebrated!

