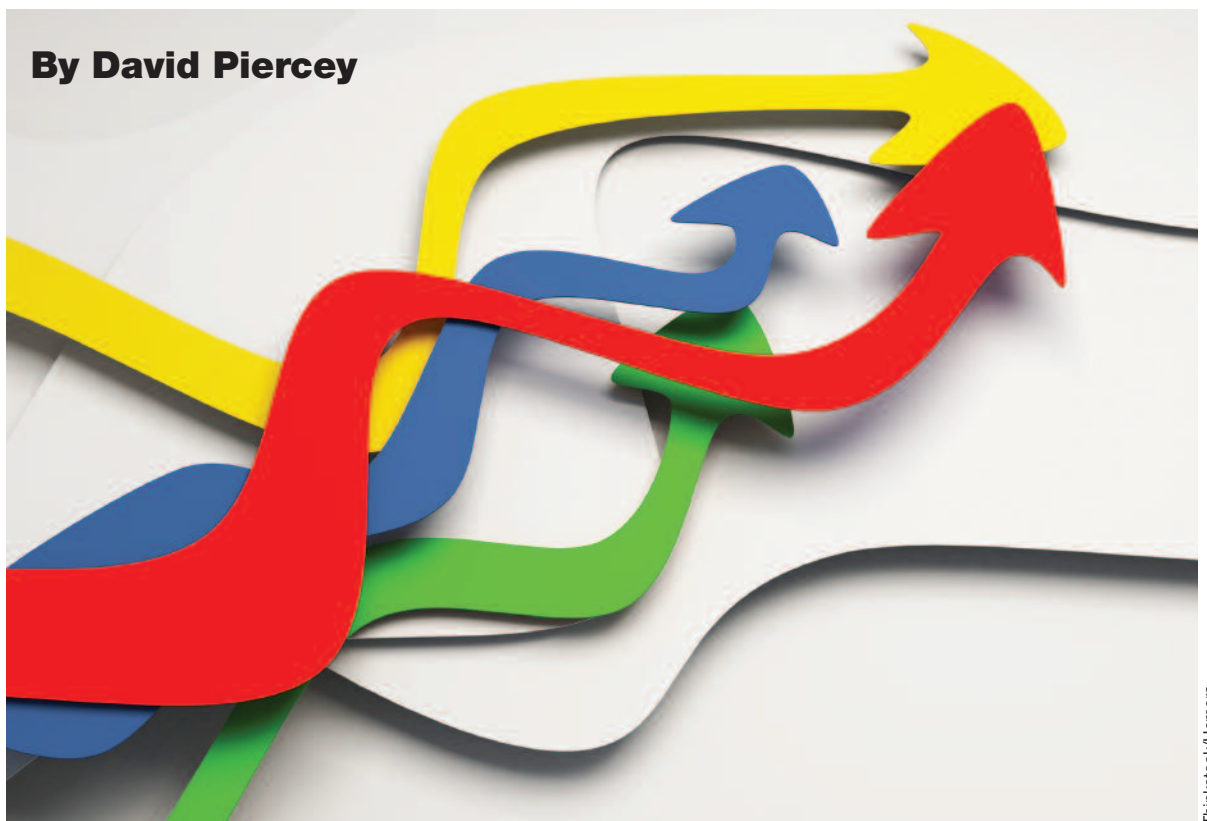


Why Don't Teachers Collaborate?

A Leadership Conundrum

If education leaders want teachers to collaborate more, then leaders must truly lead the way and model the collaboration that they want to see among teachers.



Only an accumulation of individual changes will produce a collective solution.

— Carl Jung

Teacher collaboration is a prime determinant of school improvement. Unfortunately, though we talk about it a lot, we don't do it as much as we might hope for. We take pride and feel confident when we see a few random acts of collaboration in our schools. But the *modal* behavior in schools has changed little over the years.

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This is surprising because the professional literature, for many years, has provided strong evidence that collaboration works. Still, collaboration is more the exception than the rule.

Why should this be so? Why should something that's considered a best practice not be practiced as consistently as pedagogy demands? Why should we say we're doing something when, in fact, we may be resisting it? Why should our public pronouncements profess our support for these practices when our public behaviors sometimes seem to demonstrate the opposite?

Our natural reactions may sabotage our attempts at collaboration.

Part of our problem may be our language. Collaboration may simply mean different things to different people. Without making our assumptions clear, we may never fully understand each other's meaning.

For example, we often use the word "teamwork" to describe collaboration. We expect that we should operate as "highly effective teams." Yet, when we define it in practice, we often discover that we hold many different assumptions about what is an effective team. For many Americans, thinking of "teams" calls up images of football, a sport in which a star quarterback calls the plays and other players succeed in their positions by knowing their place. However, sports teams are simply not apt metaphors for professional collaboration, despite their intuitive appeal, because there is something much more *democratic* about collaboration, with many voices as equal contributors.

Even if we can't always readily agree on a suitable definition of what teamwork should mean, and thus what *makes* a good team, we all seem to have an appreciation for what makes a *bad* team. Patrick Lencioni (2002) describes five dysfunctions of an underperforming team: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.

Interestingly, Lencioni's characteristics of a healthy team — high degrees of trust, willingness to engage in conflict in open discussions, a commitment to clarity and purpose, holding one another accountable, and focusing on collective results — are strikingly similar to the characteristics of professional learning communities (DuFour and Eaker 1998). Unfortunately, these qualities are still not that common in our schools, even in schools that claim to have professional learning communities.

Of course, any change takes time, and any new behavior must overcome old attitudes. There are always early implementers of new practices; some are more enthusiastic and some are less enthusiastic or

Six conditions are necessary for collaboration.

Collaboration:

- Is based on mutual goals;
- Requires parity among participants;
- Depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making;
- Requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
- Requires that participants share their resources; and
- Is a voluntary relationship.

Source: Friend, Marilyn, and Lynne Cook. *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*. New York: Longman, 1992.

even resistant. There also are many circumstances, particularly in the political arena, beyond our control that constrain our choices for school organization. Let us even acknowledge that our own skill sets in how to lead collaborative processes may be wanting. Still, even granting these realities, why don't teachers collaborate more?

ORDERING COLLABORATION

The professional literature continues to exhort teachers to use more authentic collaborative practices. But notice that teachers *are being told* that collaboration is how they should act.

Martin (2002) argues that, when leaders take charge of a situation, they too often convey an attitude of "I'm in charge" — with its corollary, "*and you are not.*" This "heroic" or "take charge" leadership style leads to "the death of collaboration" because it can elicit passivity and submission by subordinates. Subordinates may, in fact, abdicate more and more of their own responsibility and even feel increasingly marginalized, leading to increases in cynicism and distancing of self from the process. Collaboration thus becomes the first casualty in take-charge leadership.

The dominance and submissiveness in this kind

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of leadership situation are natural behaviors. They're adaptations to conditions our early ancestors had to overcome. However, in today's society, such behaviors may no longer have an evolutionary advantage. Instead, our natural reactions may sabotage our attempts at collaboration.

Our organizational structures may also reinforce these behaviors. For example, teaching continues to be practiced within clearly hierarchical structures. Teachers report to department heads, vice principals, or principals; principals report to assistant superintendents, associate superintendents, or superintendents. Even the language of leadership — with terms that emphasize superordinate and subordinate ranks — might inadvertently promote attitudes we no longer wish to support.

Sports teams are not apt metaphors for professional collaboration, despite their intuitive appeal, because collaboration is much more democratic.

CONDITIONS FOR COLLABORATION

Though it may not be feasible to reinvent the words or organizational structures we use, we need to reconsider the relationships they promote. If we're to achieve better collaboration, we will have to develop some common understanding, some significant attitudinal shift, and the applications of some specific skills and processes.



"It's cool how they keep bouncing back."

Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook (1992) argue that six conditions are necessary for collaboration. Collaboration:

- Is based on mutual goals;
- Requires parity among participants;
- Depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making;
- Requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
- Requires that participants share their resources; and
- Is a voluntary relationship.

Achieving all six of those conditions in our current hierarchical school systems seems difficult. Nor is it likely that we'll have time in the current school day and school year for the required discussion and consensus building. Not that all this isn't possible, but it certainly appears daunting.

If leaders are to foster collaboration, they must first change their own attitudes toward leadership. The "Authentic Leadership" movement is based on the idea that the leader's self-realization and self-transformation are necessary before organizational transformation can occur. For this to happen, an attitude of servant leadership is necessary (Greenleaf 1977). The biggest obstacle is getting used to the idea that there is not just one chief and relinquishing some of the power one has in order to empower others.

Perhaps, then, the simplest answer to the question, "Why don't teachers collaborate?" is that their leaders *won't* collaborate or *can't* demonstrate and model the necessary attributes. **K**

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Why Don't Teachers Collaborate? A Leadership Conundrum

By David Piercey

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OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE

If leaders are to foster collaboration, they must first change their own attitudes toward leadership.

KEY POINTS

- School improvement requires teacher collaboration.
- Educators may know how to collaborate but they don't often engage in collaboration.
- One reason for lack of collaboration may be confusion about the terms *collaboration* and *team* and what assumptions underlie these terms.
- There are characteristics of bad and good teams (Lencioni 2002).
- Educators are historically and culturally not accustomed to collaboration.
- Leaders who mandate collaboration set up a tension in the system.
- Organizational structures reinforce tendencies not to collaborate.
- Basically, educators need to rethink the relationships in school to enhance collaboration.
- Six conditions are necessary for collaboration, including parity among individuals.
- Essentially leaders need to change their attitudes about leadership in order to invite people to collaborate; this concept is related to servant leadership.
- Teachers who don't collaborate may not be doing so because of the messages they're getting from their leaders.

FULL VALUE

Leadership has a variety of meanings. The dictionary definition is straightforward: A leader is the one in charge. This definition suggests that the leader has the ideas, organizes them, and makes sure they are acted upon. The definition implies a hierarchy: the leader and the followers. Schools have been operating under this definition of leadership for centuries, whether this person is called a principal or a head teacher, a superintendent or the chief executive officer of a district.

What if research finds that teacher collaboration improves schools? The leader simply mandates collaboration, right? Wrong. The conundrum of collaboration lies in the meanings of collaboration and teamwork. Teams may be assigned and given time to work together, but that doesn't mean members will collaborate, a very subtle behavior based on assumptions and beliefs that have little to do with hierarchies. Leaders, therefore, need to rethink their roles, learn new skills, model collaboration, and then transform their organizations.

DEEPEN YOUR THINKING

Choose one or more of these individual inquiry topics for thinking and writing.

1. To what extent do you agree with the Jung quote at the beginning of the article: *Only an accumulation of individual changes will produce a collective solution*. What experiences have you had related to this quote?
2. *Modal* describes the means (mode) by which someone accomplishes something. When the author says, "But the modal behavior in schools has changed little over the years?" what is he talking about in your mind?

3. How do the words *collaboration* and *team* go together in your mind? Is it possible to have collaboration without a team? A team without collaboration?
4. In terms of your own experiences with teams, what are the characteristics of a bad team? A good team?
5. What could a leader do rather than mandate collaboration?
6. How do the words associated with hierarchies, *subordinate* and *superordinate* work in terms of the people with whom you work?
7. Is there ever too much collaboration? When? Are there activities in a school that don't require teams? When?
8. Which of these six conditions for collaboration are most important to you? Least important?
 - Is based on mutual goals;
 - Requires parity among participants;
 - Depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making;
 - Requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
 - Requires that participants share resources; and
 - Is a voluntary relationship (Friend and Cook, 1992).
9. What does it mean for leaders to engage in self-realization and self-transformation?
10. What are some attitudes about leadership that teachers need to change?
11. What does servant leadership mean to you? How does it apply to everyone in a school or district?

EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Activity #1

Engage with your colleagues in a mock debate. The topic is: *Principal attitudes are key in making collaboration work*. Arbitrarily assign half the group to the PRO side of the debate and half to the CON side.

1. Give each side a chance to prepare a two-minute statement for that side. (5 minutes) Have them elect two spokespersons from that side, so that there is PRO 1 and 2 and CON 1 and 2.
2. Have PRO 1 side go first, making the case for the PRO side of the argument. Those on the CON side should be taking notes. (2 minutes)
3. Have CON 1 go next, then PRO 2 and CON 2. (2 minutes each) The other side should be taking notes in preparation for rebuttal.
4. Give the PRO and CON sides time to prepare their rebuttals. (5 minutes)
5. Have CON 1 go first with a rebuttal (2 minutes), followed by PRO 1, CON 2, and PRO 2, each taking 2 minutes to speak and without being interrupted by each other.
6. Discuss the issues each side brought up and how they apply to schools you know.

Activity #2

Teams, especially those doing protocols related to student work and educator practice, have some inherent tensions According to Tina Blythe and David Allen in their book *The Facilitator's Book of Questions: Tools for Looking Together at Student and Teacher Work* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), teams experience these tensions:

- The tension between talking and listening
- The tension between discipline and play
- The tension between safety and risk
- The tension between individual learning and group learning

David Piercey talks about a tension related to collaboration: mandating it or leading it. Working together, choose any of these tensions and name others related to collaboration and leadership. Use the following chart, which may be put onto chart paper or a white board, and try to think of ways to ease the tension (or, use the tension to heighten collaboration).

Tension Between This And This	And How It Might Be Eased (Or Used)

Activity #3

Here are some definitions of the word “team” that do not exactly fit the idea of what teams mean in schools. . .or do they? Work with your group to extract from each nondefinition the ways it might work to describe school teams. Have fun!

- A contemporary Slovakian pop/rock music band. They are most famous for a single from their third album which was called “Drzím ti miesto.”
- A group on the same side
- Two or more draft animals used to pull a vehicle or farm implement
- A collection of the best talent

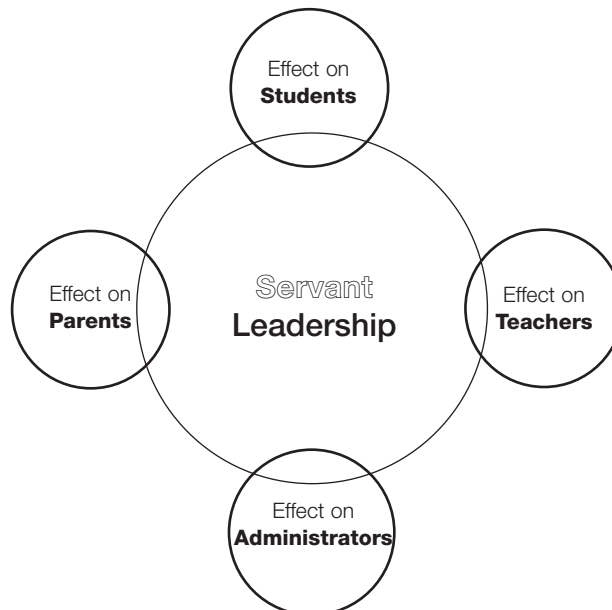
Activity #4

In one of his books on servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf wrote:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

— Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002: 27.

With your colleagues, think about a school in which servant leadership is standard. What differences would you see? Make a mind map like the one shown — change its categories if you’d like — and invite everyone to take a marker and contribute to it. Discuss results.



APPLICATIONS

This *Kappan Professional Development Guide* was created with the characteristics of adult learners in mind (*Supporting and Sustaining Teachers' Professional Development: A Principal's Guide*, by Marilyn Tallerico. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2005: 54-63):

- Active engagement
- Relevance to current challenges
- Integration of experience
- Learning style variation
- Choice and self-direction

As you think about sharing this article with other adults, how could you fulfill the adult learning needs above?

This Professional Development Guide was created so readers could apply what they have learned to work in classrooms (from *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, by Robert J. Marzano, Deborah Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2001).

- Identifying Similarities and Differences
- Summarizing and Note-Taking
- Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition
- Homework and Practice
- Nonlinguistic Representations
- Cooperative Learning
- Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback
- Generating and Testing Hypotheses
- Cues, Questions, and Advance Organizers

As you think about sharing this article with classroom teachers, how could you use these strategies with them?

More thoughts? Go to **PKConnect.org** to discuss this article with others. (First time users register at **pkintl.org** to set up a user name and password.)