

Choose Colleagues Before Friends for Teaching Teams

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WHO among us does not recall the anxiety—and sometimes pain—of waiting to be picked for a team? The brutal reality of the playground or gym held that those first picked for the team were the fastest, the best dressed, the richest, the most popular, and any other number of superlatives. Or you got picked because your friend was the captain.

Years later, as a teacher, I recall one spring when our principal put out a request for us to indicate who we would like to team with and who we would prefer to avoid. While I don't recall which names I put down on my form, I am confident that I put them down for the wrong reasons.

Like students about to pick teammates, I was likely thinking about

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who I could get along with, who might have the best sense of humor, or who would cause the least annoyance. I had no understanding that there could be a basis for building teams that went beyond the surface matter of friendships to the core issue of team effectiveness.

I wanted friendly relationships, while the key to effective teaming is complementary skills. Consider the matter of teams versus social

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groups. The literature is full of definitions for teams, ranging from precise scientific language drawn from research projects in organizational psychology to witticisms drawn from the frustrations we've all encountered in group work.

Frustration comes easily to those of us who have experienced ineffective committees, task forces, work groups, and more. As a matter of fact, it's no surprise that such groups degenerate quickly into social gatherings. Why shouldn't they? One might as well make the best of a bad situation.

It doesn't have to be this way. If

a team has actual work to do, if it has a real purpose that is something powerful enough to draw out the deep commitments of the team members, then the team has the possibility of succeeding.

The key difference is in the word "purpose." Social groups gather because they like to be together. Effective teams come together to accomplish important purposes that can be addressed through their complementary skills and knowledge.

What makes a good team? If we understand teams to be collections of individuals who bring together their complementary knowledge and skills to accomplish a common purpose, then we can put together effective teams whether or not the individuals have a fondness for one another.

Knowledge and skills are complementary when they combine in such a way that they are more effective together than in isolation. For example, if your team is working together to create a more effective transition between elementary and middle schools, effective team members will bring together different knowledge about transitional issues—someone who understands the curriculum at each level, someone who knows the developmental stages the children face, someone who understands the structure of each school, and so on.

In addition, an effective team will have members with complementary

skills—the ability to raise important questions, the ability to analyze data, the ability to focus the team on its larger purpose, or the ability to communicate team decisions.

In other words, given the focus which has been made on a worthwhile purpose, an effective team combines individuals who will contribute to accomplishing that purpose. Notice that the relevant factors relate to what team members know and are able to do rather than whether they get along.

Friends and Teammates?

Is there really anything wrong with being friends *and* teammates? No. In fact, many extraordinarily effective team relationships eventually lead to fantastic friendships. Some teams branch out to social activities as a natural response to their work together. As team members, individuals may develop social connections that they find joyful and fulfilling.

However, the team does not start from or depend on the friendship to be effective. Starting with the friendship first leads to a number of potential dangers. What are the dangers in the “friends” approach?

The first danger involves a focus on relationships instead of purpose. When a group of friends gathers, they tend to focus on whatever has created the social bond. The work of the team is secondary to this social purpose, so it becomes in-

creasingly difficult to shift from the pleasurable common ground to the business of the team.

The second danger involves conflict avoidance. Some of the best ideas arise from conflicts between differing perspectives. However, if the members of a team are more interested in preserving their friendships with one another than in generating new ideas that might be of benefit to the students, they will avoid areas that threaten such friendships. In terms of priorities, smooth relationships always trump dangerous possibilities.

The third danger addresses inability to create and enforce team norms. Effective teams discuss their ways of doing business: Is it important to start on time? Do we make decisions by consensus or voting? Are our discussions confidential? Do we agree to a unified front when we leave our meetings? Effective teams also make explicit agreements about their operating norms.

Preserving Teamwork

However, groups based on friendships typically assume that they will get along, and the rest will follow. They lose the important opportunity to lay out the kinds of explicit agreements that will preserve the work of the team. More importantly, they have no basis from which to examine their practices when things aren't working well.

How can we ensure team effec-

tiveness? The key starting point to effective teaming is in the purpose of the team itself.

Too many teams are brought together because that's what middle schools do or because the principal attended a workshop on a new idea. Teams thrive with real work. They wither when they become just another thing to do.

Once a purpose is established, getting the right people committed to the purpose is central. Team members must bring the right combination of knowledge and skills—and that means different knowledge and skills—so that the purpose might be accomplished.

Team members must articulate and embrace the purpose, and they must focus their joint work on that purpose. To assist with this, team members should define their operating norms and continually revisit whether these practices help them accomplish their purpose.

What are some tips for discovering team strengths? Team members can take some concrete steps for the purpose of discovering and reinforcing their strengths:

Spend time in early meetings talking about how you will do business. Most teams skip this important step. However, when team members explicitly agree on how they will interact (and what sorts of things are annoying to individuals), they avoid many of the frustrations of typical school groups.

Discuss with each other the specific goals and values you hold as individuals. By understanding the perspectives of your teammates, you are able to appreciate why people act as they do. For example, if you know that your colleague's most influential figure was a philosopher, it explains why that colleague asks a lot of "why" questions.

Articulate what you desire in team members. Imagine that you were seeking a new member for your team. What would you put in the job description for the kinds of knowledge and interpersonal and problem-solving skills you value?

Map members' skills in relation to your team's purpose. Create a map of the purpose, the relevant stakeholder groups, and the key events you face, all in reference to the skills your team members bring to the task. Try creating such a map independently first, followed by a team activity of mapping these skills and affirming what each member brings to the team.

Teams can increase productivity and improve the environment of many organizations. Success for such teams comes when team members commit their varied skills to a common purpose. And while friendships are wonderful, team success starts with the right colleagues for the right job. ei

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