

Leading Teams in the Era of No Child Left Behind

Middle Ground, Volume 7, Number 2, October 2003



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Fresh from summer break, Team 8-C gathers in a science classroom for the first team meeting of the year. In their third year as a team, they are ready to move beyond the issues that have previously dominated their team time. The math teacher expresses their optimism: "The first year we recycled the same worries for all the problem students. The second year we spent only half our time on them. We might actually talk about curriculum this year."

Ms. Waters, serving her turn as team leader, begins the meeting by passing out what she calls a "template" for future team meeting agendas. Just as discussion of her proposal begins Principal Rothschild bursts into the room. He plops a set of papers on the table, smiles, and makes eye contact with all four teachers. "Here it is gang," he announces, gesturing at the pile in front of him. "Your project."

"What project?" the history teacher asks, speaking for the other puzzled team members.

"Your team project for this second year. Those are your scores from the SAT-9 last year. I want every activity of this team—and all the other teams in the school—to connect to raising those scores. If it doesn't raise the scores, it better not take up your time. There's a new rule in town, and it's called NCLB. Look at those results," he says, heading to the door. "Find where your problems are and make sure your kids improve."

TEAM LEADERSHIP IN TOUGH TIMES

In this situation (fictionalized, but based on an actual team's experience), Ms. Waters faces a daunting situation as leader of a middle school team.

First, she is in a leadership role as the result of rotation. It's likely that all the teams in her school follow a similar practice: assigning leadership, like lunch duty, on the basis of turn taking rather than any particular qualities, skills, or training.

Second, Ms. Waters accepts her role with energy and commitment. She has created a plan for making the team more effective. She is leading a team that seems ready to move beyond typical team discussions of students. However, if her experience follows the customary pattern, her early enthusiasm is likely to wane as the frustrations of uncertainties about leadership grow.

Third, Ms. Waters is trying to lead a group that has no clear purpose. Whatever may have happened in their summer workshop, the team is thrown into confusion about what they are about when the principal disrupts their meeting.

The scenario described here highlights several challenges for leaders of middle school teams. In a time dominated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the leaders of such teams will face the new challenge of leading beyond accountability.



TEAM LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

The extreme emphasis on accountability in American education today threatens effective teaming at the middle level. It is not that middle schools ought to be exempt from accountability; nor is it that middle schools are likely to show poorly in terms of student achievement. Indeed, Robert Felner and others have presented evidence that implementing teaming, along with other middle school reforms, can improve student achievement. However, schools too often respond to heightened expectations for accountability by discarding practices—such as teaming—that appear to be marginal in relation to raising test scores.

Teams are integral to middle level education and demand strong, effective leadership. In fact, well-led, capable teams actually help schools meet the new requirements for accountability. However, given that few teachers have any training in how to lead their peers, developing an understanding of team leadership is essential.

Toward that end, middle school team leaders have three especially important responsibilities:

1. The effective team leader helps the team articulate a purpose for its existence and holds the team to that purpose.
2. The effective team leader works with the team to articulate and maintain productive team norms.
3. The effective team leader manages pressures and expectations placed on the team from outside in order to create opportunities for success.

Consider Ms. Waters' role as leader in light of the principal's call for the team to build all its work around data and NCLB. We see each aspect of team leadership here. First, the purpose of the team's existence comes into question.

Is the team merely a group dedicated to enhancing test scores? If the team has not embraced a specific purpose, it is subject to pursuing a string of unconnected activities with little chance for success.

Next, the operating norms of this team face a challenge. Having barely begun to propose a means of doing business, Ms. Waters sees her team immediately sent in another direction. The team leader has the opportunity to hold the team together by maintaining the practices they have agreed to.

And perhaps most evident, the team has an "outsider" place expectations and restrictions on its activities. Even though that outsider is their principal, a person who deserves attention and respect, the team still must consider how it will react to demands from the outside.

What, then, does leadership mean? How can Ms. Waters lead her team to satisfy the purposes they, as a team, see as most important, as well as those presented by the principal?



LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Articulating a purpose is by far the most significant team activity; and the leader who builds and sustains purpose leads a team to success. In many cases, middle school teams are together because that's just the way things are done in the middle school. Teams are "good for kids" or encourage "developmentally appropriate practice."

The problem is, of course, that for the leader of teams with such generic purposes, the task of leadership becomes primarily bureaucratic: someone for the main office to contact, someone to do paperwork, or someone to provide a superficial tour.

The mark of an effective team is the commitment of its members to a common purpose. However, it is not likely that any team will develop this sense of purpose and commitment based on the generic admonitions of an energetic principal.

Thus, the leader becomes the crucial factor. The leader must, first and foremost, push team members to ask why they are together. And as the routines and frustrations of the school year mount ("Can you believe what Louie did in English today?"), it is the leader who must draw the team back to its purpose.

Here is where true leadership emerges. The leader makes sure the team has articulated a worthwhile purpose and then the leader holds to the vision for the team, reminding members that success lies in focusing on the core values they have agreed on. Teams with passion for their purpose change their worlds. It is only when the team decides it has important work to do that it can be successful. Clearly, the team must work with the administration to make sure their purpose fits with the overall goals of the school. Ms. Waters should start her leadership by helping the team build a purpose statement they are passionate about.

LEADING WITH ORDER

The second role of an effective leader is to guide the team in its routine working relations.

Effective work groups are not merely like-minded friends with magical chemistry. The most effective work groups are those that manage, through agreement and conflict, to create new ideas.

Members of those groups have to agree on how they will do business. For example, how will the group make decisions? Voting? Consensus? How will the group treat members who do not participate? When and where will they meet, and what will the meetings look like?

The notion of "order" here is not a form of classroom management for adults. Rather, the idea is that groups can be far more effective if they articulate and practice behaviors that allow them to get their work done.

Ironically, according to Deborah Ancona in *Outward Bound: Strategies for Team Survival in an Organization*, most work groups develop norms in a matter of minutes and never revisit their practices, no matter how unproductive these practices might be. An effective leader not only helps team members articulate effective norms, but also invites them to revisit the practices that develop.



Ms. Waters, for example, had proposed a template for team meeting agendas. She sought to make the team more effective by building a productive routine. If she had been able to institute this promising practice, she could have helped the team even more by conducting a discussion of the practice four to six weeks later to determine whether this routine was serving the team well. The leader continually asks whether the team's way of doing business is helping the team succeed.

LEADING WITH OTHERS

The third role of an effective leader is to manage the boundaries of the team. Outsiders, such as a counselor, parent, or another teacher, may want to impose ideas and activities on the team. At times, the team may seek information or send information out from the group. The leader has special responsibility in helping the team to manage such boundaries effectively.

While it may be appropriate for a team to accept the suggestion from a reading consultant that they alter how they teach their students to process text, it is the team that should decide to embrace or reject such a suggestion.

Effective leaders help teams realize they can and should assert a good deal of control over boundary demands. At times this may mean negotiating with outside forces to protect the core purpose of the team. At times, it may mean outright resistance.

Of course, the response to the principal demands special attention. If, for example, the team had articulated a purpose of providing students with relevant, integrated instruction, the response to the principal may simply be to educate him. In his concern to raise test scores, he may have lost sight of the fact that students who experience relevant, integrated curricula do, in fact, see a gain in test scores.

Ms. Waters, as leader, helps the team understand the principal's request and helps the principal understand how their team work is consistent with his goals.

LEADING BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY

The challenges for teachers have been exaggerated by NCLB. The challenges for teams have multiplied. The fierce autonomy of test scores and the differential weighting of performance by subject area (reading scores are very important; social studies scores are minimized) are forces that threaten to fracture teams.

The new challenge of leading beyond accountability will be to hold teams together so that the good purposes of teaming and the benefits for students are not lost in a frenzy of testing.

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Original publication information:

Kain, D. L. (2003). Leading teams in the era of No Child Left Behind. *Middle Ground*, 7(2), 15-18.