

The Advantage of Effective Teams

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It's been quite some time since I was required to read peer-reviewed research papers and summarize the methodology, hypothesis, statistical significance, and implications of the study. Honestly, when I decided not to pursue a career in higher education upon receiving my doctoral degree, I thought I had put this stage of my education behind me. But a recent

podcast, *The Hidden Brain*, had an episode devoted to what makes teams effective (Vendantam, 2023). Since Dr. Snell and I provide professional development for school and district leaders on this exact topic, I was compelled to listen and read the research behind the podcast.

We are in an era of education in which one cannot expect that we can “go it alone” and produce amazing results. The days of “close the door and teach” are behind us. I believe the reason for this move away from isolationism to teaming is twofold. First, it never was truly effective. Margaret Wheatley addressed this when she said, “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals that can go it alone.” Our preK-12 system is not designed for isolationism. It is designed as a step-by-step process of skill attainment and mastery. As a student, I was not successful at college-level physics because I had not been offered nor mastered the skills of calculus. As a fourth-grade teacher, I could not expect my students to comprehend the books they were reading had they not been taught the phonemic structure and phonetic makeup of our English language. Second, in an environment where educators are constantly challenged and confronted with what is taught, how it is taught, to whom it is taught and why it is taught, a single individual cannot be successful without a teaming approach to curriculum and instruction. Equally, with the social and emotional challenges facing educators, both from the students they serve as well as their own mental well-being, it is imperative that teams work collaboratively to “lighten the load.”

Dr. Anita Williams Woolley, a psychologist from Carnegie Mellon University, shared several insights from her research when interviewed for the *Hidden Brain* podcast. As I dug further into her research, I was drawn to several findings that I believe have implications for the work of school and district leaders.

“A group’s collective intelligence reflects its capacity

to perform well across a variety of cognitive tasks and it transcends the individual intelligence of its members” (Meslic, Aggarwal, & Curseu, 2016). In other words, it really doesn't matter if you have the smartest person on your team, because the intelligence the team has, as a collection of individuals, surpasses the intelligence of any one team member. As we serve on school-level teams (e.g., child study teams, instructional support teams, department teams) and district-level teams (e.g., Act 93 team, safety and security team, curriculum committee) it is important to remember the role each person plays on the team and the impact each person has on the effectiveness and success of the team. Most important to this collective intelligence is the need for team members to have fine-tuned their



interpersonal skills because interaction between members is imperative to the effectiveness of the team. For us to build highly effective teams, we must take time to build the social sensitivity that the members of the team possess. That is, how team members are attuned to the needs and behaviors of other team members and their ability to predict how fellow teammates will react, respond and behave. When teams have members with strong social sensitivity, there is a greater effectiveness of the team. Less effective teams have a member that does not possess fine-tuned interpersonal skills. I am reminded of the sayings “the chain is only as strong as the weakest link” and “one bad apple

spoils the bunch.” This study proves that those sayings hold true for teams as well. Although I’m confident you didn’t need an empirical research study to tell you that. We have all experienced this phenomenon. The challenge comes from addressing this team member and either coaching them out of the team or coaching them up so that their interactions with other members increase the effectiveness of the team.

While some team members possess the social sensitivity necessary to contribute to a highly effective team, others need to be coached to a point where their social sensitivity lends to team effectiveness. As principals and supervisors charged with coaching and nurturing these teams, it is essential that we realize that before we can coach, we have to develop relationships with our team members. Relationships are built and coaching occurs when we redirect ineffective behavior or actions by assuming positive intent. That is, the person who has made the mistake has done so with all of the best intentions. Assuming positive intent elevates your interactions and behaviors with the person to a level of coaching, rather than descending into discipline. Positive intent conversations build respect for you as a leader while developing the social sensitivity of your team members.

“In other words, groups where a few people dominated the conversation were less collectively intelligent than those with a more equal distribution of conversational turn-taking” (Woolley et al., 2010). A team member who consumes time by overpowering the discussion is not a team member. In fact, that person takes away from the effectiveness of the team and must be reminded to allow others to share. Stephen Covey’s discusses this in his seminal work, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “seek first to understand, then to be understood” (Covey, 1989). This comes from listening and gaining an insight into all members’ contributions before taking over the conversation.

As team leaders, we must confront this behavior head on and in private conversations with team members. Remember to assume positive intent when having these conversations. This is not the time to scold or discipline, but rather to grow the social sensitivity of the team members. Remind the dominant speaker of the importance of hearing all views and that by dominating the conversation, they could actually be squelching a brilliant idea. It is also

appropriate to address the “quiet mouse” on the team. Explain your expectations and that their silence sends mixed messages. Do they not have an opinion? Do they believe the discussion is useless? Are they intimidated by others on the team? Finally, you, as the team leader, must create protocols to promote equal talk among team members. These may include non-verbal signals or rules of engagement that are reviewed at each meeting before, during and after discussion.

“Finally, [collective intelligence] was positively and significantly correlated with the proportion of females in the group” (Woolley et al., 2010). The research pointed out that this fact did not mean that teams composed entirely of women were most collectively intelligent. Instead, groups that were mixed gender with a female majority held the distinction of being most collectively intelligent. Personally, I think this speaks to the importance of having various viewpoints, knowledge and intelligence on a team. This study doesn’t point to the effectiveness of cross-cultural teams, multiracial teams, or any other demographic mix. However, my experience has shown that when we combine a willingness to listen to others (interpersonal skills), the ability to understand each other’s behaviors and tendencies (social sensitivity) and a group of individuals from different backgrounds, genders and beliefs, the effectiveness of the team is multiplied substantially.

I began my teaching career in a small elementary school where I was the only male teacher. I worked as an assistant superintendent guiding high school curriculum teams that were comprised mostly of men due to some archaic hiring practices. While my experiences with both teams were comfortable, I wonder if they were truly effective without a divergence of backgrounds, genders and beliefs. What are you doing to build a team that has diversity in gender, background and experience?

We are constantly required to work in teams. We are rarely, if ever, taught how **to work as a team**. If you are interested in building your team’s capacity and intelligence, consider offering the professional development session Dr. Snell and I conduct, “The Team: Building Leadership Success that Improves Student Learning.” Remember Margaret Wheatley’s words, “Relationships are all there is.” ■

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