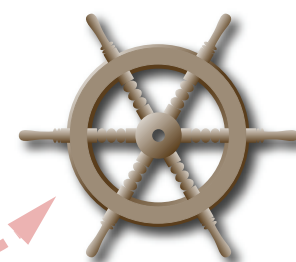


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Staff Relationships and Student Learning

by Danny Eddy, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Development & Community College

The March 2006 issue of Educational Leadership contains an article by Roland Barth titled “*Improving Relationships Within The Schoolhouse*.” This is not a new area for Barth as he has researched and written a number of books and papers on the topic of the importance of the relationships adults in a school have with each other and how these relationships relate to school climate and student accomplishment. Barth indicates that this one factor – the nature of the relationships among the adults within a school – “has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and/or student accomplishment than anything else.”

As an educational researcher and writer, Barth is not alone in this belief. Michael Fullan notes that “Collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success. Virtually every research study on this topic has found this to be the case.” David and Roger Johnson also concluded that the benefits of teacher collaboration include: “greater student achievement, more positive interpersonal relationships and cohesion as a staff, increased social support within the staff and enhanced self-esteem for teachers.” Patrick Lencioni who works with various organizations to improve their leadership, organizational health, teamwork and culture offers the following reflection: “When it comes to helping people find fulfillment in their work, there is nothing more important than teamwork.”

If we accept the premise that positive adult relationships and teamwork are effective ways to improve schools, then how do we get there? What are the types of adult relationships in schools and what do they look like?

Barth categorizes the relationships in four ways: Parallel Play, Adversarial Relationships, Congenial Relationships and Collegial Relationships.

Barth describes Parallel Play as basically everyone doing their own thing without knowing or caring about what the other staff members are doing. There is little or no connection among the adults and their efforts.

Adversarial Relationships would be described as intentional actions intended to make a peer or peers look inferior, incompetent or lacking in certain skills. Barth indicates it is this type of relationship that will actually drive teachers into “Parallel Play.”

Congenial Relationships: Barth describes these relationships as personal and friendly. He states that congenial relationships are a “pre-condition” for the fourth category, Collegial Relationships.

Collegial Relationships: This type of relationship is “highly prized by school reformers yet highly elusive.” Barth contends that schools are full of good players (teachers). Collegiality is about getting them to work effectively together as a team. The words of Vince Lombardi, respected football coach of the Green Bay Packers, seem fitting: “The challenge for every organization is to build a feeling of oneness, of dependence upon one another ... because the question is usually not how well each person works, but how well they work together.”

Barth states that when visiting schools, he looks for evidence of collegiality among teachers and administrators. He sees this as reflected in four areas:

1. Educators talking with one another about practice.
2. Educators sharing their “teaching” craft knowledge.
3. Educators observing one another while they are engaged in practice.
4. Educators rooting for one another’s success.

As educators, our task is to consider the relationships in our school(s). Are we working in a collegial atmosphere? Do we actively discuss our teaching pedagogy



with our peers? Do we share our acquired knowledge with our peers – especially the numerous younger teachers joining our ranks? Do we actively encourage others to observe us when we teach and vice versa, and then reflect together on the observations? Do we hope for the success of our peers and celebrate these events when they occur?

Working together as an effective school team is demanding work. It challenges us to be responsible for more than just our “courses” or teaching assignments. It requires that we become knowledgeable about our colleagues and their areas of strength and their needs. It requires that we accept our responsibility as a member of the team and the common goals we are collectively working to achieve.

Patrick Lencioni writes, “Like so many other aspects of life, teamwork comes down to mastering a set of behaviours that are uncomplicated, but extremely difficult to put into practice day after day. Success comes only for those groups that overcome the all-too-human behavioural

tendencies that corrupt teams and breed dysfunctional politics with them.”

The NSTU Professional Development staff officers are available to assist school staff by providing workshops that assist in creating effective school teams. These workshops are listed below.

Five Functions of Effective Teams: This interactive and engaging workshop focuses on the ultimate goal of your team and the five functions that will support your team’s success. The NSTU offers this workshop in both French and English.

Death by Meeting: Based upon the work of Patrick Lencioni, this interactive and engaging workshop supports your team in establishing effective meetings to support your team’s ultimate goal.

Effective School Teams: This interactive activity based workshop is designed to assist staffs in understanding the importance of effective school teams as it relates to student learning.

To book a session, please contact Gail Doucette at gdoucette@staff.nstu.ca or 1-800-565-6788 / 477-5621 locally.

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