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Applied Project Reflection
05/02/2021
EDSP 387

Time (hours)	Activity
1	Adapted Thousand and Villa group functioning assessment, created Google Form.
1	Write request and rational to Principal for conducting survey, and then seek participation from colleagues (emails)
1/2	Explain survey, rational, and how to complete it to colleagues at Data Team-colleagues complete survey
2	Analyze data looking for surprising results/read comments/make recommendations for next steps.
1/2	Type up results and recommendations and send to colleagues to review.

During this trimester, my applied project focused on identifying what stage our grades 1-2 Data Team was in, the overall functioning of our group, and future recommendations regarding collaboration. To ascertain this information, I conducted a survey adapted from Thousand and Villa's *Are We Really a Team?* survey (1992). I received permission from our principal to administer the survey using Google Forms to assess overall team climate and group functioning during our Data Teams meeting on April 14th, 2021. While some members of our 7-person group completed it during that meeting, others completed the survey on their own time or not at all (5 total participants out of 7 responded to the survey). Finally, I analyzed and reported back the data to my colleagues, but because an additional meeting was set in place of our scheduled Data Team meeting on April 24th, 2021, I provided my findings as well as recommendations for our team via email.

My individual goal for this project was to work on my interpersonal skills with my colleagues. Connecting with my colleagues was a bit difficult on more than a superficial level. Additionally, I felt extremely uncomfortable during times of conflict over the past year and a half. Unsure as to how to react when my colleagues disagreed vehemently, I often withdrew from the conversation and ceased to listen or participate actively. I believe it also contributed to me struggling to contribute during meetings unless called upon directly. Since this district is new to me over the last year and a half, I have tried to get to

know my colleagues on a more significant level than just meagerly asking about their day, plans for the weekend, etc. I hoped to demonstrate to my colleagues in this survey that I am indeed very interested in their perspectives on how our team was functioning, as well as any other insights they might have. Given I received 5 out of 7 surveys back and several very candid comments regarding impressions and feelings my teammates had about our Data Team meetings, I believe my colleagues opened up and trusted me to share how they were perceiving our time together. I also had two colleagues speak with me privately and let me know how good it felt to take the time and think about how we work together, instead of just accomplishing tasks on our agenda. I think my goal of developing stronger interpersonal skills was met, and I feel more valued and heard when I do contribute at team meetings.

While I did not receive surveys back from every member (even with multiple, kind reminders), I think it gave me a tremendous amount of information, even in those who abstained from the survey. The sheer fact that the two individuals who did not respond are often the ones I have the least communication from, gave me the opportunity to stress the need for us all to communicate more regularly, as well as lean into greater accountability to one another. As educational leader Dennis Sparks said, a team that views accountability as a priority "Willingly reviews its progress, can describe its work to others, and welcomes feedback and suggestions," (2013 p. 30). The organizational goal I had for this project initially was to help our Data Team avoid confrontation and conflict. However, through the learning provided in this course, I believe my goal has changed. I am no longer worried about limiting conflict within our team, but rather seek to navigate and help our team grow through disagreement and critical feedback. Sparks said healthy teams must be able to trust one another and be able to:

> "have discussions, with the encouragement of different viewpoints, about how to reach goals. Team members have the courage to share their viewpoint, even if it varies from the majority of the group. Team members are open-minded, listen, and give colleagues a chance to speak. Respectful dialogue is the norm." (2013, p.30)

While I do think our grades 1 and 2 team is beginning to be more communicative during our time together, given the results of the Team Analysis project and the results of this survey, I believe we still have a tremendous amount of work to do out of our current *storming* status and towards a *performing* group. For instance, one of the comments that was made took me by surprise. One response read,

> "My answers fluctuate some based on when certain staff member is present. I often feel battered by a certain staff member. I don't see this person badgering others in the group as often as she/he interrogates me or corrects my vocabulary- language which I have "adopted" from the group." (2021)

This took me by surprise, as 80% of the responses for the question, "We have agreed upon and established group norms (no interrupting, put-downs, etc.)" was yes. This comment alone suggests that not all members are experiencing parity or feel comfortable in our team space. Going back to our teams norms and clarifying/reiterating group expectations would be a good place to start getting our team back on track. While I am certainly working on my own interpersonal skills, this comment stood out to me that perhaps I am not the only one aware there is room for growth in this area amongst us all.

This project, coupled with my own two personal goals has shown me that leadership can come from many different avenues and individuals. In the past, I have shied away from disagreeing with my colleagues and deferred to the judgement of a senior leader or administrator. However, through learning more about distributed leadership related to collaboration, it is clear that each of us on the team possess skills and capabilities that contribute to the overall effectiveness of the team. The challenge becomes communicating that knowledge and intellect in a way that can be heard and effectively used by developing social capital. As professor of Educational Leadership Judith Nappi described,

> "In order to be a successful teacher leader, an individual must have the ability to communicate with administrators, teachers, and other staff members. Communication is the key to translating intellectual capital into social capital through shared leadership." (2014 p. 32)

After completing this assignment and examining our work thus far as a team, it is clear we have some work to do regarding communication. While there are a couple of individuals on our team who do not seem as engaged in our collaborative efforts right now, Ronfeldt et al. found that perhaps the benefits of collaboration can still be felt by students.

> "Another possibility, though, is that the students of a given teacher might experience greater achievement gains because of the surrounding collective levels of collaboration, regardless of the individual contribution of the teacher in question. We call this the "collectivist" mechanism." (2015 p. 510)

This suggests that as a team, it is not necessary to hound one or two people to contribute as effectively or consistently as the collective group. Instead, if the team as a whole is engaging in high quality collaborative activities, the peripheral teachers and students will still benefit. My hope is that through direct and specific feedback regarding our functioning as a group, and purposeful exposure to effective team practices at our Data Team meetings all individuals will begin to operate at a higher level of group functioning.

Another interesting data point from this project was that only 20% of respondents (1 person) believed we had a clear goal for our team. This is important as Friend and Cook have explained in their research as well as many others that a shared, clearly defined goal is essential to any collaborative team. I believe my colleagues have a general, collective idea that we want to improve our students' learning experiences, but to truly make academic improvements, it seems essential we redefine and clarify our goal as a collaborative team. This time spent developing a shared view of what we seek to improve for our students and the outcomes we seek would be time well spent both for our own clarification and for our students. Indeed, researchers, Moolenar et al. asserted,

> "A potential route to school improvement therefore may be to grow strong ties among teachers, cultivate their collective beliefs, and as a result, harvest increased student achievement." (2012, p. 260)

One result from the survey took me by surprise. The question, "We complete our agenda items," was marked 100% of the time. However, my perception of this was quite different than my colleagues. I often see we have indeed checked off boxes for completing tasks but rarely do I feel as though we have truly engaged in a collaborative process. It is mainly about getting tasks completed and educators and other service providers provide data updates on specific students. While data/assessment driven discussion does appear to be linked to student academic achievement (Ronfeldt et al. 2015), it is not the only activity where collaboration can occur. It seems there is an opportunity for deeper conversation and sharing of ideas if we increased the variety of our collaborative activities. As professors and authors in the field of English Language Learning Andrea Honigsfeld and Maria G. Dove explained, "Instructional collaborative activities allow teachers to align teaching objectives, materials, learning strategies, and assessment," (2012, p. 42). There is much opportunity for us as a team to branch out and engage in meaningful, collaborative practices that dig deeper into our own pedagogical practices. For instance, one of the instructional tasks Honigsfeld and Dove suggest is collaborative assessment of student work. While we are content-area specific at our school, often we are seeing similar results in written work as students are developing that literacy competency. If we all participated in calibration checks, looking at what 1st or 2nd grade writing or responses should look like, perhaps no matter our content area (English Language Arts, Science, Math, Speech, etc.) our teaching would become more interdisciplinary and thus, more effective.

Overall, given the results of the survey I believe we have three big next steps we can take as a team. I suggested we reread our groups' norms and take time to discuss them, perhaps helping to clarify any misconceptions or make any additions as we see fit. The next step from there would be to establish a team-created specific, agreed-upon goal. Finally, I think if we engaged in more substantial and varied collaborative activities, we would have more opportunity to practice embracing diverse perspectives, disagree responsibly, and work through conflict. Hopefully, our team would progress from the Storming

phase to the Norming and ultimately Performing stage. This growth and learning would benefit not only

our team but our students as well.

Work Cited

Honigsfeld, A., Dove, M. (2012). Collaborative practices to support all students. *Principal Leadership*. 40-45.

While focused on English Language Learner and general education collaboration, this article provided multiple, specific ideas for collaborative activities for teachers. It was helpful to help reimagine how our collaborative Data Team sessions might look.

Moolenaar, N., Sleegers, P. Daly, A. (2012). Teaming up: linking collaboration networks, collective efficacy, and student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28(2), 251-262.

This Dutch study of 53 schools provided much data to support the effectiveness of collaboration on student academic achievement. This work adds empirical data to support the link between collaborative efforts amongst and around teachers and their students' success.

Nappi, J. S. (2014). The teacher leader: Improving schools by building social capital through shared leadership. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 80(4), 29–34.

Nappi focused on the importance of distributed leadership, moving away from principals and administrators making pedagogical decisions. Nappi also provided specific ways educators could assume leadership roles within their teams.

Ronfeldt, M., Grissom, J., McQueen, K., (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(3), 475-514.

This study included over 9,000 participants in the Miami-Dade school district over a two-year period. The findings highlighted the importance of high-quality collaboration as an indicator and predictor of student success. This article greatly emphasized teacher growth as a result of high quality collaboration.

Sparks, D. (2013). Strong teams, strong schools. *Journal of Staff Development*, 34(2), 28-30.

Sparks outlined a useful rubric when evaluating teams based on effective qualities. Alternatively, this article was also helpful in identifying some of the struggles and challenges teams face.

Thousand, J., Villa, R., Stainback, S., Stainback, W. (1992). Restructuring and caring for effective education: an administrative guide to creating heterogenous schools. Ch. 5. Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

While this excerpt was not from the past 10 years, it was very helpful in defining collaborative teams and outlining positive characteristics. I also used the group functioning assessment and modified it slightly to fit the needs of my Applied project study.