

Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

Conzemius, A. & O'Neill, J. (2002). *The Handbook for SMART School Teams*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, pp. 198 - 200.

Hale, Judith (2007). *The Performance Consultant's Fieldbook: Tools and Techniques for Improving Organizations and People, Second Edition*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer, pp. 105 – 108.

Jolly, A. (2004). *A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams*. North Carolina: SERVE, p. 4-1.

Kaplan, R. S. and Norton, D. P. (1996). *The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy Into Action*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Katzenbach, J. R. & Smith, D. K. (2001). *The Discipline of Teams: A Mindbook-Workbook For Delivering Small Group Performance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, p. 201.

McManus, A. *et al.* (1992). *The Memory Jogger for Education: A Pocket Guide of Tools for Continuous Improvement in Schools*. Salem, NH: GOAL/QPC. See website: www.goalqpc.com

Michalski, W. J. (1998). *40 Tools for Cross-Functional Teams*. NY: Productivity Press, pp. 93 – 95.

Page, D., *et al.* (2007). *Base Camp Curriculum*. Atlanta, GA: Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement. Performance-based modules on using quality tools and team process may be downloaded without cost to any Georgia educator at www.galeaders.org

Scholtes, P. R. *et al.*, (1994). *The Team Handbook for Educators: How to Use Teams to Improve Quality*. Madison, WI: Joiner Associates, Inc., p. 2-12.

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Team-Based School Improvement: A Process Focused on Performance

This Issue Brief is the third in a four-part series on team-based school improvement. The first article (November 2007, Vol.6, No.1) emphasized the “big picture” of what the leader needs to know and be able to do in order to lead team-based school improvement to achieve student success and organizational effectiveness; the second article (February 2008, Vol. 6, No.2) provided a guide for the leader to prepare for the success of team-based improvement. This third installment focuses on the process for engaging and training the team to determine causes of identified problems. The fourth installment will reveal how members of the initial team lead successive dynamic teams to develop solutions to address the identified causes of performance challenges. Tips and tools for team success in achieving high performance are included.

“Teams are an essential building block for performance in the face of profound change....Largely because of the overwhelming amount of change we all face, performance challenges demand that small groups adapt and respond quickly in all parts, places, and levels of the enterprise,” assert authors Katzenbach and Smith (2001). Teamwork, then, must become second-nature. Teamwork must be interwoven as part of the culture. For school improvement issues best suited to team resolution, the focus of such teamwork must be on performance.

High performing schools establish student success and organizational effectiveness as the reasons for the pervasive implementation of team-based school improvement. In other words, they focus teamwork on improving the performance of students and, through the process, also enhance the performance of the teams and the school. Engaging all faculty and a critical mass of key stakeholders, including students, in teams to solve identified school performance

challenges is essential to the long-term sustainability of school improvement efforts (Page, *et al.*, 2007). An unyielding focus on performance engages teams in ongoing learning and requires an effective process to fuel this continuous improvement cycle. Leaders who guide their teams through a systematic process, then follow through by monitoring, measuring and supporting team success increase the likelihood of performance improvement.

Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement (2007) suggests creating an initial team, then leading the team in analyzing data to develop a clear need statement, identify performance measures, establish and refine SMART goals, and analyze causes. This process reflects the Logic Chain (Hale, 2007), a tool utilized by performance consultants who help clients improve the performance of organizations and people.

Need Identification and Team Selection

Savvy leaders prepare for team success, taking the time to analyze multiple data sources in order to have a clear idea of student needs on which to focus team-based improvement. With this advance work, the leader knows the strengths needed on the initial team. For example, if data analysis reveals that the primary need is to improve 8th grade reading for students with disabilities, the leader knows it will be imperative to ensure inclusion of reading teachers and special education teachers, as well as others, on the team. This information, coupled with knowledge of team member strengths, allows the leader to include colleagues whose collective strengths represent all 8 Roles of School Leaders™ (Page | *et al.*, 2007). It is critically important to also reach into the community and/or the student body (especially at middle and high school), to ensure a balance of strengths and to demonstrate the leader's commitment to engage key stakeholder groups on the team.

Another aspect of selecting the initial team focuses on developing leadership capacity. Because the ultimate goal is the pervasive use of team-based approaches to ensure performance, the leader will want to select a strong first team, including colleagues who have a proven record in school improvement, and who have either the experience or the capacity to lead subsequent teams. The role of the leader now becomes facilitator and teacher of the initial team to ensure their success and to prepare them to lead additional teams so that teamwork becomes “the way we do things around here.” It is imperative for the leader to invest time and energy in teaching this initial team the process, checking for understanding, and providing feedback regarding their learning and performance along the way.

Orienting and focusing the team up front will result in team confidence and will provide a return on their investment of time and energy. When everyone knows in advance how the process will work and what is expected, the team process is more likely to run smoothly. This proactive approach also prevents hurt feelings and uncomfortable situations that may arise when well intentioned team members who are not clear on expectations inadvertently behave in a way that is not in the best interests of teamwork.

While it is tempting for the leader to assume that adults already know how to collaborate and work as a team, leaders who skip the essential step of orienting the team, do so at great risk to team effectiveness. As noted in *A Facilitator’s Guide to Professional Learning Teams* (2004), teachers frequently do their work in isolation, therefore; “...teachers often find themselves in unfamiliar territory when sitting down together to hold professional conversations about their instruction and to take action based on group decisions.”

The first meeting with the initial team should include information on why team members were tapped (make each team member’s strengths visible), why the team exists, how the team’s work will make a positive difference in performance, what the team will be expected to do, how participation will work, when the team will meet, and what process the team will follow. It is important to signal from the beginning that teamwork is participatory, so it makes sense to engage team members in setting the group norms that will guide team behavior. For example, norms may include: We will start and end on time; members will come with completed assignments in hand; decisions will be reached by consensus; actions will be data informed; and we will remain on task during our weekly meetings.

Setting Performance Measures, and Writing SMART Goals

Recall that the leader has already examined and analyzed data sets and has a good idea of the student need that requires teacher intervention. For example, the leader’s analysis of multiple data sets may reveal that significant improvement is required for the performance of 8th grade students with disabilities on the reading portion of the CRCT. The leader should share this insight with the team and enlist their commitment to follow a process to improve student performance in the area of identified need. The need should be clearly stated, but the leader must be open for the team to refine the identified need through their data analysis.

While the broad need has been expressed from the leader’s analysis of data, the skillful leader brings in key data sources and engages the initial team in an analysis of multiple sets of data. Data speak volumes. Once the team sees what the leader sees—or refines what the leader sees—the team is ready to validate or adjust the need statement to communicate concisely the problem to be resolved. Once everyone recognizes the need, the team becomes energized and focused on the work ahead.

With the need validated and/or refined, the leader next guides the team in identifying performance measures. A performance measure is a metric that will positively affect performance. It reflects an opportunity for improvement, is within the team’s control, and is measurable. Savvy leaders encourage teams to set a balanced set of performance measures in four goal areas: student achievement; internal processes that define organizational effectiveness; faculty, staff, student and stakeholder engagement; and team learning and growth. This balanced perspective is based on the work of Kaplan and Norton (1996), experts in measuring performance.

Teams usually have no trouble setting performance measures for student achievement; however, they may need leader guidance in thinking through the other three goal areas. The leader may guide the team’s thinking by asking for each goal area, “What performance within our team’s control must be measured and monitored in order to improve the performance of students?”

Here are examples:

- Student Achievement: percentage of students in each sub-group meeting standards on the CRCT
- Internal Processes: percentage of students in each sub-group who are in special education classes
- Faculty, Staff, Student and Stakeholder Engagement: percentage of students who are engaged in a mentoring program
- Team Learning and Growth: percentage of teachers serving on a team to create common reading assessments

Based on their data analysis, the team first describes current performance (the base line). Next, the team sets performance targets over three years for each goal area. Performance measures establish a clear line of site for the team’s work. Performance measures for student achievement may include indicators of student success, such as SAT, CRCT, HSGT, etc., as well as other data sources.

Here are sample performance measures for student achievement:

Current Reality: In 2008, 45 percent of 8th grade students with disabilities (SWD) met standards in reading.

- 1st Year Target: In 2009, 55 percent of 8th grade SWD will meet reading standards
- 2nd Year Target: In 2010, 65 percent of 8th grade SWD will meet reading standards
- 3rd Year Target: In 2011, 75 percent of 8th grade SWD will meet reading standards

When coupled with the “exceeds reading standards” data, significant student progress will be realized.

Once the performance measures have been established, the team will want to refine the need statement into a SMART goal. For the example above, the SMART goal would read:

We will improve the student performance of 8th grade students with disabilities from a baseline of 45 percent meeting expectations in reading in 2008 to 55 percent by 2009, 65 percent by 2010 and 75 percent by 2011.

The year-to-year targets allow the team to take manageable “bites” out of the “elephant” of reading performance and track progress over time.

Analyzing Causes

Once people see the problem clearly, team members are ready to discuss possible causes. Effective team leaders will equip themselves with an array of tools and strategies that help the team ultimately dig deeper to find the root causes. Initially, however, the team leader invites the team to get all ideas about causes “on the table.” Brainstorming is a fast way to get a list of potential causes. Again, it will be tempting to assume that all adults know how to brainstorm, but the savvy leader will take time to simply remind the team of the rules of engagement: accept all ideas without judgment; contribute one idea at a time; honor all voices; “pass” if you can’t think of an idea; “piggyback” on other people’s ideas; etc. It is important to remind the team of the *purpose* of whatever strategy is selected. For example, the purpose of brainstorming is to get a lot of

ideas in front of people. Later, those ideas can be scrutinized and whittled down, but initially, the idea is to withhold judgment that might squelch creative sparks.

While it may not be reasonable to expect team leaders to know all the “tricks of the trade,” team leaders can access valuable resources that provide step-by-step assistance in how to guide teams to identify potential causes, verify causes and identify root causes. There are many sources available. Conzemius and O’Neill (2002) offer four simple questions to guide the process: “*Why* is the problem occurring? *Where* is the problem occurring? How *big* is the problem? What are the *biggest drivers* of the problem? This simple questioning technique helps teams analyze the problem for root causes and invites them to gather additional data to verify the problem and to identify the drivers of the problem.

Michalski (1998) offers a wealth of quality tools to lead team processes, such as affinity diagrams which are useful for sorting the initial list of potential causes into “buckets” of like items. *The Memory Jogger for Education* offers a treasure of tools, such as the Pareto Chart, useful for identifying high priority causes, while Scholtes et al. (1994) remind us of the companion 80-20 rule: 80% of challenges comes from only 20 percent of the problems. This simple admonition helps teams select high leverage causes on which to focus in order to make big gains in performance.

All of these resources, and many more like them, define the tool or strategy, why it can be helpful, when it should be used, and how to use the tool effectively. Leaders need not be shy about reaching for helpful resources and tools to guide the process of leading teams to select a handful of high leverage root causes to be solved.

Conclusion

In the fourth and concluding issue brief in this series, team leaders prepare team members of the initial team to lead other teams to solve the root causes that have been identified. An important role for the leader is to keep solution-jumping at bay until the real causes of problems have been identified. By following a systematic process of utilizing data analysis to identify the need, set performance measures, write SMART goals, and analyze causes, the team will successfully determine a set of high leverage causes that will yield big dividends in performance once resolved. ■

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