

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & TRAINING

P E R S P E C T I V E S O N E D U C A T I O N

WORKING IN TEAMS

Neville J. Johnson

Knowledge&Skills
Building a Future



Perspectives on Education

Working in Teams

Neville J. Johnson

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P E R S P E C T I V E S O N E D U C A T I O N

W O R K I N G I N T E A M S

Neville J. Johnson



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FOREWORD



Working in Teams is published by Student Outcomes, a Division of the Office of School Education, as part of the

Perspectives on Education series.

Other publications in the series include:

- Keeping Kids at School
- Understanding Organisational Health, and
- Teaching and School Effectiveness.

These occasional publications offer information, research and opinion on topical issues in education. They are designed to be accessible to a wide, school-based audience, stimulating the exchange of ideas and good practice amongst those working in the education field.

Throughout *Working in Teams*, Dr Neville Johnson examines contemporary research findings and draws on his experience of working with schools over many years to provide a model for implementing school improvement and change. The notion of working in teams is explored as a means to re-culture schools and to build professional learning relationships.

Working in Teams offers an absorbing and practical discussion on a subject of significant interest to principals and teachers alike. I believe you will find much to consider in this and other publications in the series.

Mary Buchanan
Assistant General Manager
School Improvement

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

How can schools, and teachers in particular, maintain their commitment to improving student learning, develop their own professional knowledge and enjoy a sense of professional wellbeing when society's expectations of schools show no signs of diminishing?

There is growing evidence that a significant part of the answer might lie in teachers working in teams. Productive teamwork in which teachers gain new knowledge about what they do and how students learn has the power to change the culture of schools and make continuous learning and improvement not only possible but manageable.

However, like teaching, working in teams does not come easily nor follow a predictable recipe. It's only through working in teams over time that we learn what makes them function effectively and in ways that both contribute to the goals of the school and are capable of being sustained.

Dr Neville Johnson has, over many years, worked closely with schools on curriculum projects. For some time now, his interest has been the work of school teams in curriculum renewal and the professional development of teachers in what he calls 'intensified workplaces' where challenges abound.

In this publication, he first sets out a four-part approach to effectively implementing change in schools, which includes setting up action-learning teams. He then draws on his own experience and research and the research of his colleagues to suggest what makes these teams work.

A FOUR-PART STRATEGY FOR SCHOOLS

All schools want to improve learning opportunities for their students so that they are better able to develop the knowledge and skills they need to live productively and responsibly in an increasingly complex world.

But how are they to do this effectively when the demands of school system authorities, of day-to-day work, of the local school setting and the personal needs of staff (as they affect their professional role) all contribute to the intensification of schools as workplaces.

Work with schools suggests that it is possible to sustain and build staff and student learning and wellbeing in this intensified context. Schools who have managed this have shown themselves willing to rethink the common, the usual and the comfortable. In the modern context of 'intensified workplaces', school improvement often requires this kind of shift or change in culture, structures and relationships.

Careful observation of these schools reveals that they systematically identify significant areas to work on and then move into planned action. They frequently employ a school renewal strategy based on four inter-related actions that help them manage forces for change and the tensions these generate.

These four actions are:

- Identify the learning and teaching challenges facing the school.

- Plan a coherent across-years program to address these challenges.
- Choose short-term projects that directly enhance learning and teaching and contribute to the achievement of program goals.
- Have staff work in professional action-learning teams with a project focus.

1. IDENTIFY THE LEARNING AND TEACHING CHALLENGES FACING THE SCHOOL.

This requires a willingness to continually gather information on current practice and examine its connection to student and staff wellbeing, performance and learning. This needs to happen on an ongoing basis and apply to individual staff members, groups of staff (such as faculties or year levels) and the total school.

It is imperative that the challenges identified are grounded in the reality of the school.

For instance, the school community may be alerted to an area of potential challenge by a system initiative (such as 'the middle years of schooling'), but the school must make this initiative their own by turning it 'inside-out'. That is, they must determine if there is evidence that their school faces challenges in this area and then be quite specific in identifying what these are (see Figure 3, page 22).

2. PLAN A COHERENT ACROSS-YEARS PROGRAM TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES.

The next step is to devise programs for student and staff learning that are:

- coherent
- focused on the identified learning and teaching challenges
- are sustained over a long period of time.

These programs may take the form of 'strategic plans', 'school development plans' or 'School Charters'.

Many schools devise across-years programs but fail to explicitly and continually connect them to the learning and teaching challenges that they have identified. This connection is essential if the program is not to 'lose its way' and if commitment to it is to be gained and sustained.

3. DEVISE SHORT-TERM PROJECTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF PROGRAM GOALS.

Programs require a practical means to implement them so that staff don't tire of expending effort and energy on initiatives where there is little evidence of planning or improvement.

This is where short-term projects come in. These projects are stages in the ongoing program, but they make the long-term work manageable and allow for a more immediate sense of achievement.

At a minimum, effective projects:

- address the learning and teaching challenges that have been identified as important
- are grounded in the reality of the school's context and stated in these terms
- have an implementation plan that makes explicit how the challenges will be addressed and how the learning of students and staff will be enhanced
- identify what is to be done in order to make the desired difference in learning
- make explicit the anticipated outcomes for both the learning of teachers and the improvement of the organisation
- have a relatively short timeline (approximately one school term in duration)
- have a beginning and an end (even though the projects are seen as stages and are essentially ongoing).

4. HAVE STAFF WORK IN PROFESSIONAL ACTION-LEARNING TEAMS THAT HAVE A PROJECT FOCUS.

While there's still a lot to learn about working in teams, ongoing studies are providing evidence of the potential of the professional action-learning team to support staff learning and, as a consequence, deliver significant learning gains for students.

'Action learning' is defined as: 'The learning (that) occurs among a group of colleagues who develop a united approach to solving a problem' (ANTA, 1996).

Proponents of ‘action-learning’ argue that it is more than ‘learning by doing’ since it aims to develop in participants a fresh perspective on existing knowledge and experience, enabling them to rethink and reinterpret it whenever necessary.

Studies of action-learning teams have examined not only the ‘task’ and ‘process’ elements of teamwork — the kinds of tasks teams work on and the processes they use — but also the ‘learning’ elements. These are the aspects of working in teams which assist teachers to learn more profoundly about their work and, as a result, enhance their sense of professional wellbeing.

Learning together in this way makes it more likely that teachers will improve what they do and will develop more deeply informed perspectives, even in pressured and complex times.

In a fundamental sense, any school improvement and renewal process is an attempt to sustain and build a school’s internal learning capacity. This capacity is influenced by the individual teachers within the school, the school’s social and structural learning context, and the school’s external context. Professional action-learning teams are a vehicle for improving teaching and learning while integrating and taking account of these influences.

WHAT MAKES THEM EFFECTIVE?

There is evidence from a number of recent studies and projects that having teachers work in professional action-learning teams can reduce ‘between classroom’ differences in student achievement and provide a structure that contributes significantly to schools becoming ‘learning communities’.

From the work of teacher teams in the implementation of curriculum initiatives in Victoria and in school renewal projects in New South Wales, there appear to be ten characteristics shared by effective staff teams in schools (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE STAFF TEAMS

- Projects that provide purpose
- Collective responsibility
- Teachers’ professional learning
- Genuine collaboration
- Support for teachers
- Formal leadership
- Widespread leadership
- Attention to relationships
- Making system demands your own
- Expecting difference

1. PROJECTS PROVIDE PURPOSE

School-based projects give professional action-learning teams a reason to work and learn together; to engage in an integrated, action-learning approach to implementing carefully selected curriculum initiatives.

Working in teams is both challenging and rewarding. It is challenging because in busy schools it is difficult to find time to meet when all members can be present, and the dynamics of establishing high performing teams in the school context are complex.

There is nothing more disturbing to teachers than teams that appear to be engaged in doing efficiently

things that don’t seem to be worth doing. Teachers need to be convinced that there is a purpose for being in a team which can be defended in terms of student learning and usefulness to staff.

Projects designed to achieve carefully selected curriculum aims give teachers a reason for teaming up and engaging in collective learning that is related to classroom practice.

Effective projects

Effective projects are characterised by:

- a focus on the real work of teachers
- a purpose that is to do with a learning and teaching challenge of importance to the team and the school
- a plan that makes explicit how the learning of students will be enhanced
- explicit outcomes for individual teachers' learning and organisational improvement
- a small team of colleagues who are committed to offer support and productively challenge each other
- team members who are prepared to reflect on their own learning.

Projects provide a vehicle for integrating school and system initiatives and priorities. Trials in schools have demonstrated that it is worth the team's effort and time to construct a focused *project statement*. This provides a powerful basis for determining a project's scope, ensuring its goals are congruent with overall program goals and developing an effective implementation plan.

For example:

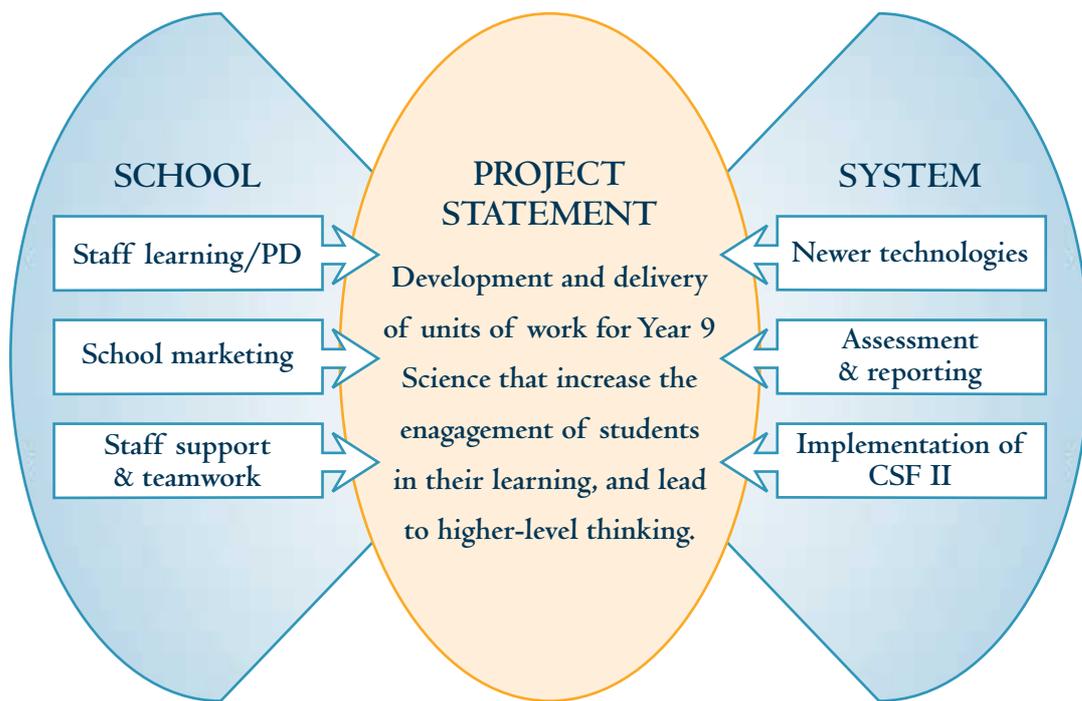
Project statement — Development and delivery of units of work for Year 9 Science that increase engagement of students in their learning and lead to higher-level thinking.

This project statement includes the critical characteristics of a well-focused project are:

- It identifies whose learning is the focus of the project and makes the link to staff and student learning explicit.
- The 'vehicle' for the project is an existing real work task, not something extra.
- It identifies what is going to be emphasised and undertaken to make the desired difference in learning.
- It is examined for its capacity to integrate many of the work demands from outside and inside the school (see Figure 2).

On this last point, the most powerful projects provide a structure for integrating and achieving many school and system initiatives and goals. They connect many proposed improvement strands to de-intensify the workplace, allowing staff to feel more 'in control'. Figure 2 illustrates the range of school and system initiatives that might be integrated into the project.

FIGURE 2: INTEGRATIVE POWER OF THE PROJECT – PROJECT WHEEL



Importantly, in the context of an intensified workplace, projects have a beginning and an end (even though they are staged and essentially ongoing). This provides staff with the opportunity to celebrate successes and feel a sense of reward and closure in their work.

In this way, too, short-term projects that are part of a coherent, ongoing plan help schools to avoid working on too many unconnected fronts, and developing an 'incessant improvement culture' for no tangible outcomes and using one-shot approaches to professional development.

2. COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Learning teams increasingly assume collective responsibility for producing more effective learning for all students, regardless of who teaches them, while each team member maintains a commitment to individual accountability.

It is accepted in the culture of teaching that teachers are individually accountable for the students they teach. However, a critical characteristic of professional action-learning teams is that, in addition to each team member being individually accountable, the team collectively takes responsibility for achieving learning gains for all students, regardless of who teaches them.

It is this aspect of teamwork that is often very difficult to achieve. It frequently requires teachers to rethink the very concept of a 'team' and how staff teams work.

Many school teams require teachers to work 'in the company of' other teachers, but not 'with' them in the sense of acknowledging collective responsibility for student learning.

This requires the experience of all teachers within the team to be shared, with insights into what's being tried in the project, including difficulties and uncertainties, openly acknowledged. It means that the achievements (and the under-achievement) of all students for whom the team is responsible have

to be collectively examined and responded to. In turn, this requires a professional, non-judgemental climate of enquiry, and this can only be fostered over time.

Initially, many teachers find the level of trust and cooperation that has to be achieved daunting and difficult to deliver because it challenges the boundaries of individual autonomy within which most teachers operate.

However, when it is achieved, the impact of such positive interdependence on reducing the 'between-classroom' differences in student achievement has been shown to be considerable. This is primarily because staff members actively support each other in providing — for all students — the kinds of learning opportunities that are deemed essential for effective learning.

The pay-off from increased collective responsibility comes not only in student learning. School staffs reap the rewards of professional support from their colleagues in the form of their own further growth in competence and confidence. And with collective responsibility comes the opportunity for genuinely collective and 'deeper' learning.

3. TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Professional action-learning teams benefit from learning opportunities and professional support that is both embedded in the workplace and provided in outside settings.

A school community which is committed to sustaining and building its internal learning capacity recognises that for students' learning to improve, teachers have to learn too. Professional learning is 'the key to the development of the curriculum and is the main way to improve the quality of children's education' (Nias, 1992).

'Staff professional development' is a concept that is given meaning by those who organise, plan, conduct, and participate in it. If it is to be a major lever and cornerstone for schools 'becoming' learning communities, it may need to be reconceptualised.

Presently, staff professional development is often narrowly conceived as courses and special activities, usually conducted off-site or after school. If staff professional development is to be the cornerstone of building a learning community, then it will need to be more broadly conceived as 'opportunities for staff learning that occur naturally in the workplace' as well as outside it on appropriate occasions.

In a school that gives a high priority to increasing the knowledge and expertise of its staff, multiple forms and models of staff professional development are embraced, selected and combined (as is appropriate) to address particular requirements (Johnson, 1991).

Use is made of forms such as short courses, action learning, peer coaching and mentoring, case discussions, study groups, small-group problem-solving, journal writing and professional networking.

In addition to formal activities (such as outside-provided training and experience-sharing workshops), staff teams in learning-centred schools make great use of the informal learning opportunities on offer in everyday work-related and work-embedded situations.

These may include planning meetings, teachers watching each other teach, and curriculum design and review activities. During these activities, it is important that the staff learning is made explicit and the connection between the activity and staff professional development is recognised in some way.

Professional action-learning teams that operate across faculties or are based around learning areas or particular year levels and are coordinated by 'lead teachers' provide a particularly useful model of professional development — one that is focused on projects to do with real work and involving an action-learning approach.

The research into professional learning teams supports the view that schools can no longer afford the luxury of separating professional development activities from the ongoing realities of teachers' work. The two must be seen as integrated and interdependent if teachers are to be supported, and school renewal and ongoing improvement efforts are to be successful.

Professional development undertaken as part of teachers' real work is integrated and not added-on, and is therefore less likely to further overload and intensify the work-life of teachers.

At the same time, an appropriate combination of outside-provided and work-embedded support for teachers addresses the criticism that work-based learning, on its own, might fail to give teachers access to the best knowledge and strategies available to the profession.

The 'combination' approach allows for tapping into expert sources outside the school, as necessary, while providing ongoing, systematic and reflective workplace support. This acknowledges the well-documented poor transfer to the classroom of learning from outside school sources.

Effective staff development

Professional action-learning teams provide many of the conditions of effective staff development:

- Staff development that is embedded in the workplace increases teachers' levels of inquiry into new practices and the implementation of school improvement initiatives.
- Staff development that is structured as an inquiry fuels teachers' energy and results in initiatives that have greater effects.
- Building small work groups that are connected to the larger school community but which remain responsible for one another, will increase the sense of belonging that reduces stress, isolation, and feelings of alienation (Joyce et. al., 1999).

Professional action-learning teams also make it possible for:

- teachers' professional learning to concentrate on the enhancement of student learning, with a focus on what staff predict will make a learning difference
- the specific contexts within which staff teach to determine the content of their professional learning
- sustained opportunities to learn through ongoing projects, where ideas can be tested and embedded in practice and where there is follow-up and long-term feedback
- collaboration with professional peers both inside and outside the school
- teachers to control the substance of their professional learning.

4. GENUINE COLLABORATION

Learning teams engage in 'deep' forms of collaboration that are more likely to lead to transfer of ideas into practice.

Collaboration is at the very heart of effective staff teams in schools.

In the teacher professional development literature, research evidence suggests that collaborative staff practices encourage teachers to be more available for ongoing growth and to learn from each other by sharing ideas and developing expertise together. In addition, collaborative cultures often emphasise a commitment to career-long learning as part of the professional obligation of teachers.

However, while commitment to collaboration is important, over-commitment or compulsion can be damaging. Forms of 'contrived collegiality' and collaboration for purposes opposed to more effective learning, need to be challenged.

Often collaboration is used for indefensible purposes such as to avoid confronting a challenge, or to maintain existing approaches to learning and teaching that are challenged by school-based evidence or by current theory on effective learning practice.

In a professional action-learning team, there is a learning focus that is defensible, and collaboration between staff which enhances both individual and organisational learning.

Effective teams are characterised by their use of a variety of collective learning opportunities, most of which involve routine sharing and joint work. The main options include:

- shared talk — regular and systematic talk among staff
- shared work — collaborative development of policy, programs and activities
- observation of teaching — regular and systematic observation by teachers of one another's classes
- collaborative problem-solving (action-learning) — development and implementation of feasible solutions to issues and challenges that teachers have identified and worked on.

Professional action-learning teams conceive of collaboration broadly. Judith Warren Little (1990) introduced the notion of a continuum of collaboration, which involves teachers moving from isolation to different degrees of interdependence and collegiality.

Teachers may begin with those options with which they are most comfortable, then combine and add more collaborative options as necessary. Such opportunities for collective learning increasingly involve staff in collaboration of the kind that is more likely to lead to actual transfer to classrooms of the ideas being considered.

To achieve this 'deep' collaboration, team members engage in ways of working that eventually include forthright professional disclosure and being

prepared to model and demonstrate classroom strategies. Central to the success of these processes are critical reflection and taking a problem-solving approach to real tasks that are part of teachers' work.

5. SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Learning teams provide three frames of support for teachers: personal, professional and structural.

Two key elements of staff development are the 'workshop' and the 'workplace' (Joyce and Showers, 1995). The workshop is where teachers gain understanding, observe demonstrations of teaching strategies and have the opportunity to practise them. However, if the intention is to transfer those skills into the workplace, then merely attending the workshop is insufficient.

One of the major misconceptions about teaching is that it is a relatively easy-to-learn task. Ongoing collegial support in the workplace becomes a necessity if teachers are to take up new and complex teaching strategies and successfully transfer these into their repertoire of teaching practice.

A number of studies (cited by Joyce and Showers) support the position that unless structured opportunities for professional development and training are provided, teachers do not acquire new teaching skills; and unless adequate follow-up and support is provided in the workplace, the new skills do not find their way into the classroom.

When teachers are asked to consider a change in their teaching practice, this is, in essence, an invitation to 're-position' themselves. The notion of 're-positioning' acknowledges and values the fact that people already hold a position in their current practice and that taking a different position often requires courage and a willingness to undertake new learning.

When faced with this kind of challenge, professional action-learning teams can provide three frames of support to their members: personal (moral), professional and structural (Rogers, 1999).

The very existence of a professional learning team provides structural support for the teachers who are part of it and helps build positive collegial relationships among them. However, it is interesting to note that some staff teams limit their support to personal caring (moral support) and fail to provide the professional support so necessary for enhanced teacher (and hence student) learning to occur.

All three frames of support are essential if the 'deep' collaboration required for transfer of new teaching ideas into classroom practice is to occur. They are also necessary if a balance between pressure to change and support for teachers to do so is to be achieved — identified as an important factor in successful implementation of school and classroom change (Fullan, 1991).

The concept of ‘personal productive challenge’ is a useful one when considering what makes for effective teacher learning or change (Baird, 1992). ‘Challenge’ is seen to have two main components: a cognitive demand component, and an affective interest component.

When this idea is applied to teacher learning, the optimal situation is where the teacher has high interest in the new learning or in the change being proposed and is faced with a proposal of high (but not too high) cognitive demand. In such a case, the challenge is likely to be positive and productive and the teacher likely to engage in the learning enthusiastically and effectively.

Challenge is likely to be non-productive in situations where the cognitive demand is high, but interest is low; where the demand of the challenge is low while interest is high; and where both demand and interest are low. It is interesting to note that Thelen’s idea that an element of ‘discomfort’ for the learner is necessary if new learning is to occur (put forward 40 years ago) is a similar idea to the notion of ‘challenge’.

Effective learning teams get the right balance between the pressure to change — that is, the need to do so and the nature of the challenge in what’s proposed — and the support that teachers need, so that a productive challenge for the individual and the team results.

6. FORMAL LEADERSHIP

Learning teams require formal leaders who are knowledgeable, skilled and supportive, who emphasise and model the importance of staff learning and who act as coordinators, advocates and linkers.

When it comes to school and classroom improvement that is dependent upon changing what teachers do, the evidence is that staff teams require formal leadership.

Formal leaders of projects must be able to work with teachers in the roles of coach and mentor, assisting them to develop the kinds of teaching skills which will improve student learning. Leaders also need to be able to assist in the provision of resources and work with the school community as a team advocate to establish and maintain the profile of a project.

One study has shown that this can be achieved when leaders of change projects are themselves given adequate leadership training and support, and when their roles are valued and resourced with an appropriate time allocation (Johnson and Scull, 1999).

This study also indicated that the aspect of the formal leadership role which had the greatest influence on student learning was the leader’s involvement in work-embedded staff professional development. This often took the form of leading the team through problem-solving processes related to ‘real work’ issues.

Another study of the professional learning that occurred in six teams in five secondary schools supports this observation, emphasising the important role team leaders can play in facilitating group problem-solving processes (Leithwood et. al., 1997). The team leader should help create opportunities for teaching strategies to be modelled and shared, and see to the provision of additional coaching and support for teachers, as required.

Another important aspect of the role of the formal team leader is as a 'linker'; of team members with each other; of teachers with ideas; and of team members with materials and resources.

In the role of 'linker', the formal leader of the team often helps team members to form 'pedagogic partnerships' in order to 'develop a discourse about, and a language for, teaching' and to see the big picture of their work context — thus challenging the limited view that often results from teachers working in isolation (Hopkins, 1998).

There is a very real danger, however, that the formal leaders of teams will be people so overloaded with administrative and managerial tasks that they are unable to devote sufficient time to supporting the learning of their colleagues.

To address this concern, it is essential that school management rethink the role and duties of project leadership and employ strategies such as the rotation of personnel in these roles and the provision of additional support staff.

7. WIDESPREAD LEADERSHIP

In learning teams all members consider themselves to be leaders and change agents and distribute tasks and roles accordingly.

Although project teams usually benefit from having a formal leader who acts as coordinator, advocate, linker and 'leader-learner', in an effective action-learning team, the 'functions' of leadership are distributed between all team members.

Studies of professional action-learning teams have demonstrated the need for valuing both the collective and the individual. Each member must acknowledge the role that he or she has to play in implementing classroom change, while the view that each teacher is a change agent must underpin the discussion and action of staff teams.

Much of the hope and expectation of school improvement and renewal has been based on the assumption of significant changes in mainstream approaches to organisational leadership. In essence, these changes rest on the assertion that effective school leadership is not monopolised by the principal and other formal leaders, but is shared with staff, students and the adult advocates of students.

In professional action-learning teams, decisions related to the team's functioning are shared. Furthermore, when it comes to the key individuals in the team who might stimulate team thinking:

this person does not have to be the nominal leader. Anyone (and preferably everyone) can exercise expert, group problem-solving processes with advantage to the team's learning (Leithwood et. al, 1997).

8. ATTENTION TO RELATIONSHIPS

Successful learning teams address the tensions inherent in the personal and professional relationships within the team. They engage in learning conversations to address these tensions and avoid embattled positions.

Curriculum change, more often than not, flounders at the classroom door because what is usually required for successful curriculum implementation is change in teacher practice and in beliefs about learning and teaching.

Often 'false clarity' occurs, with teachers thinking they have changed when they have only 'assimilated the superficial trappings of the new practice' (Fullan et. al., 1991).

As with the learning of children and young adults, much debate has taken place on the 'what' and 'how' of teacher learning, while there has been little discussion of the 'where' and 'with whom'. An encouraging development in schools is the interest being shown in rethinking the place and role of colleagues in staff learning.

Each teacher brings to their work pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, conceptions of their professional role and the teaching world. This personal framework or 'cage' needs to be acknowledged, valued and used if teachers are to commit themselves to personal and organisational 'betterment' in terms of their own improved learning (and consequently that of their students) and their greater empowerment as teachers.

This requirement places a 'mutual' demand on staff members and the school as an organisation to establish the internal conditions necessary to satisfy the needs of all staff.

Handling tensions

As demonstrated in studies of learning teams, the coordinators of such teams can find themselves in situations of tension and dilemma. They are often positioned between school administrators and initiators of proposals for change — with their focus on school and system goals and project outcomes — and the teacher members of the learning teams, with their focus on the action needed to address the challenges of the classroom.

Formal leaders have to be able to handle the tensions that often manifest themselves in taunts such as, 'It's alright for them!'. It is essential that all teachers in the learning team strive to see the world through the eyes of the other members of the team and have some understanding of the demands they are expected to meet.

In addition, the team focus on collective learning and positive interdependence, when combined with the expectation of individual accountability, may heighten tensions in the personal and professional relationships of team members.

When teachers are challenged to provide particular learning experiences for all students, staff who might once have avoided classroom change might now feel threatened when this is no longer possible.

Therefore, in professional learning teams, members have to establish a climate of trust, where it is

considered acceptable to express doubt and uncertainty and to request and offer professional support. The team must always be alert to the need to maintain effective working relationships, and each member needs to develop and use interpersonal and small-group skills to address tensions as they arise.

Successful professional action- learning teams don't ignore the tensions that arise and they approach them from a 'learning' stance. They engage in 'learning conversations' and avoid 'a battle of messages' when engaged in difficult conversations (Stone et. al, 1999).

TABLE 1: APPROACHES TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
(ADAPTED FROM STONE ET. AL, 1999)

	'A BATTLE OF MESSAGES' ASSUMPTIONS	'A LEARNING CONVERSATION' ASSUMPTIONS
The WHAT HAPPENED Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know all I need to know to understand what happened. • I know what they intended. • It's all their fault. (Or, it's all my fault). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn't know. • I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don't and can't know what's in their head. • We have probably both contributed to this situation.
The FEELINGS Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't be helpful to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings are the heart of the situation. They are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings.
The IDENTITY Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect.

Using time differently

Teachers are more likely to take embattled positions on issues and fail to engage in ‘learning conversations’ if the pressures of time are extreme and there is insufficient ‘quality’ time to work on more than the bare necessities of the complex work of teaching.

Professional learning teams that have demonstrated success in enhancing student and staff learning, while maintaining staff morale, reported that they had been required to rethink the nature and use of their time.

The guiding principles and actions that these teams developed and practised included:

- Use existing time differently, rather than adding extra time. This means rationalising and limiting the frequency of meetings, dedicating existing meeting time to project meetings and using this time for doing ‘real work’ rather than talking about the work that needs to be done.
- Embed external demands into existing real-work projects. A change of mindset — from ‘doing’ to ‘using’ outside initiatives — is essential.
- Work more cleverly by integrating many internal and external initiatives. Use the ‘project wheel’ (see Figure 2, page 11) to see what can be integrated within a project.

9. MAKE SYSTEM DEMANDS YOUR OWN

Effective learning teams address external initiatives by linking them to internal, school-identified challenges.

It is important to acknowledge the tensions, dilemmas and even paradoxes facing schools that are committed to responding responsibly to system demands and to pursuing school and classroom improvement and change.

The evidence from the field is that school staff are generally accepting of an improvement (or ‘betterment’) culture. However, they will often respond negatively to an incessant improvement culture that they perceive as change for change’s sake.

It is to be expected that system and school personnel view the process of school change and improvement differently. To some extent, they each ‘march to a different drum’. A dilemma faces schools when they perceive a lack of congruence between the views of the system and those of the profession or the school community.

However, there is evidence that some schools seem to be able to work their way through such dilemmas by giving serious consideration to externally initiated changes by making them work for them. They never ‘do’ the change, they ‘use’ it.

For example, the empowered school does not mindlessly ‘do’ a new curriculum or accountability framework. Rather, it considers how the framework

could be used to provide even more effective learning conditions for their students.

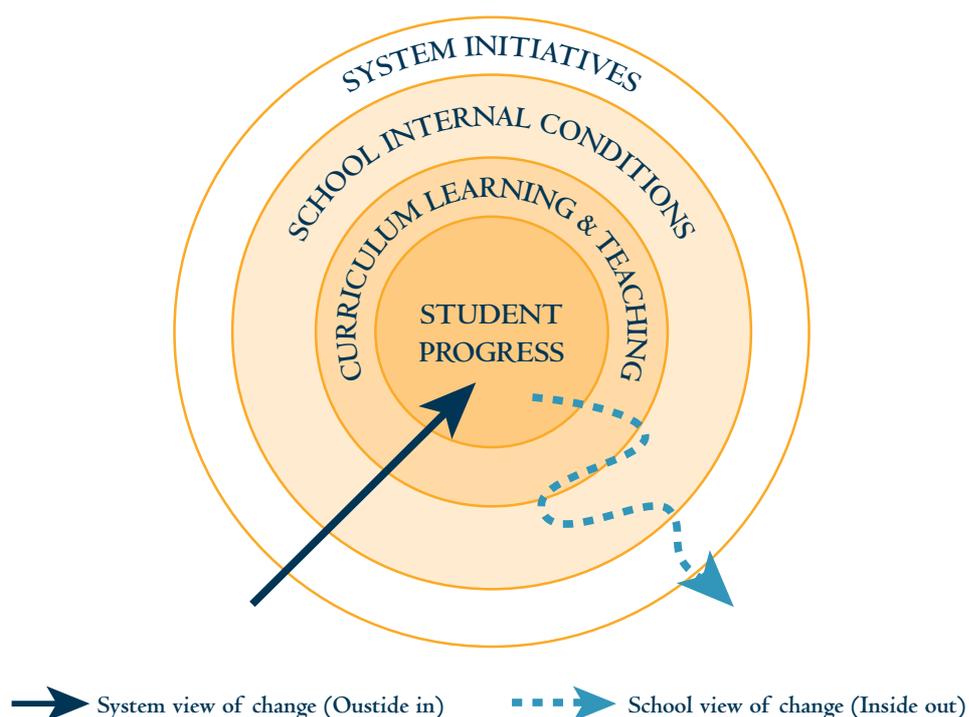
In addition, they may even use the work they do in making sense of the framework to further build a collaborative culture in the school by having groups of staff explore the framework's possibilities together. An added bonus may be the opportunities for teacher learning (professional development and training) that this presents.

These schools are aware that the demands of both school and system have to be attended to by school personnel. By employing strategies that adapt

system ('outside-in') demands to school priorities — turning them 'inside-out' — they stay in control and remain responsible. Figure 3 illustrates this process.

Effective learning teams never lose control of the improvement and change process. When they are faced with an outside proposal for change, they shape it to address the learning and teaching challenges of their own school context, but without the proposal losing its critical characteristics and essence. Similarly, the teachers are prepared to change their practices in line with the essence of the change proposal when they see how they can make this work for themselves and their students.

FIGURE 3: SYSTEM AND SCHOOL VIEWS OF CHANGE
(ADAPTED FROM DAVID HOPKINS, 1998)



10. EXPECT DIFFERENCE

Professional action-learning teams acknowledge their particular history, composition and dynamics. They implement change in ways and at rates different from one another.

It is to be expected that when faced with a proposal for curriculum change, different learning teams will express different concerns and exhibit different levels of knowledge, comfort and sophistication in their approach to it.

Some learning teams will be satisfied with routine implementation of the 'new' curriculum in a competent but passive-management way, while others will insist on refining, extending and challenging the ideas and practices of the new curriculum.

It is essential, therefore, in a learning community, that while teams of learners have to be challenged, they must also have realistic expectations. They should 'think big, but start small'.

A FINAL WORD

School culture says something about the internal conditions of the school community. It tells us what is important in the work of the school, how the school goes about doing this work, and how people in the school community relate to each other.

Changing school culture is increasingly recognised as a critical element in schools improving the learning of their students while meeting the various demands of the modern-day context in which schools work.

'Re-culturing' the school, a recent focus of attention in schools and school research, stresses the importance of climate and spirit; motivation and morale; and the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs associated with the school — and the connection these have with the learning and performance of teachers and students.

Changing the culture of any organisation is not easy to achieve. In the case of schools:

- it assumes that staff acknowledge the value of doing so
- it often runs up against structural and procedural constraints
- it may take too long to achieve if students and parents are excluded from the process.

In addition, the culture as documented, enacted and experienced may not be congruent; that is, there may be a tension between what is desired and expressed and what is practised.

Schools that have responded to increased demands and expectations with improved performance and positive organisational health recognise that culture does not exist in a vacuum; that it is bound by a context, grounded in structures of time and space, and that these structures shape relationships.

This interdependence of school culture, structures and relationships — and the need to know and act on this — is observed by Canadian educator, Andy Hargreaves:

It is not possible to establish productive school cultures without prior changes being effected in school structures that increase the opportunities for meaningful working relationships and collegial support between teachers.

The importance of the structural option of restructuring, therefore, may be less in terms of its direct impact on curriculum, assessment, ability grouping and the like, than in terms of how it creates improved opportunities for teachers to work together on a continuing basis.

(Hargreaves, 1994)

Structure creates culture. Culture renews structure. The two are inseparable. Restructuring alone is empty and hollow; merely a rearrangement of categories that are devoid of human meaning and relationship. Re-culturing undertaken in isolation runs against the grain of existing structures and will eventually succumb to them. Restructuring and re-culturing must therefore be undertaken together.

(Hargreaves, 1995)

At the heart of professional action-learning teams are interactive learning processes that revolve around collective thinking and action — teachers working and learning together in ways that go well beyond the superficial.

Learning teams exemplify a structural change that has the potential to change school culture and establish the types of relationships that support the staff of a school as they strive to address the challenges of learning in a demanding and changing context.

Professional action-learning teams are a high ‘leverage’ strategy in school improvement because they:

- position teachers and their schools as decision makers in the change process
- value and extend teacher professionalism
- allow school teams to use system initiatives, integrating them into their real work
- provide a rich set of solutions to the challenges of teacher development and student learning for all schools
- enhance schools’ capacity for change for the purpose of improving learning and teaching.

Such teams support **professional teacher learning** — the ongoing development of teachers’ knowledge, skills and dispositions — by providing a sustainable and useful means of responding to work-embedded and outside-provided learning opportunities.

They develop and sustain a **professional learning community** by putting the individual capacity of teachers to use in an organised collective enterprise (action-learning projects).

They contribute to program coherence through projects that contribute to long-term programs which are focused on the challenges of school and classroom teaching and learning.

SOME EFFECTIVE TEAMS IN SCHOOLS

There are many schools in Victoria where teachers are working together in effective teams. These teams usually have the characteristics of effective teams that have been identified in this article. Two examples are:

Northcote High School — Integrated curriculum teams

The Vision behind the teams

The school community took part in wide-ranging discussions about teaching and learning, which resulted in the development of a teaching and learning charter. All staff were involved in an open discussion about ideas on teaching and learning. It was seen as important to honour what participants brought to the discussions. The whole staff learnt from each other and developed an understanding of the teaching and learning charter.

Two key points arising from this process were:

- Identifying the teaching and learning strategy of having students work on integrated projects.
- Teachers working in teams to develop curriculum within and across faculty areas, to promote collegiality and a sense of common purpose and to provide support.

At the same time the approach to professional development was reviewed and staff were asked to complete individual teaching and learning plans to guide their own professional development. This was a move away from in-service instruction to personal mastery. Staff were also asked to be part of at least one team. Each staff member was seen as a staff developer for everyone else.

This process was important in establishing a culture of continuous learning with a focus on collegiality and teamwork.

An Integrated Curriculum Team

The teaching and learning charter identified working on integrated projects as a priority. One of the reasons for adopting this approach was that it was seen to deliver many of the components of effective teaching identified by projects such as Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD).

A typical integrated curriculum team consists of three teachers covering English, Mathematics, SOSE and Science at Year 7 or Year 8. A team then develops three integrated projects delivered over

two semesters. Projects are based around a design brief and are completed in class in about a four-week period. Integrated curriculum classes are timetabled into a room with at least six computers, as a technology component is a key part of each project. A major part of the final product is a multimedia presentation.

Teachers who agreed to work together were identified and timetabled together to form the teams. It was seen as important to have cohesive teams and at this stage not all classes at years 7 and 8 are involved in the integrated curriculum program. The number of teams has grown over the past three years as teachers become familiar with the process and feel comfortable with working in teams.

The most successful teams were those who met consistently to plan and monitor the projects. Evaluation data shows that teachers have preferences about who they work with effectively. Happy teams were effective teams. Teams have an informal structure although there is usually a leader. No team building strategies have been employed to enhance the operation of the teams however this is being investigated. The biggest blocker in the process was the commitment required for planning. A variety of approaches were tried to provide time for teams to meet.

Working as a team to develop and implement a design brief was seen as a learning opportunity and the involvement of technology in the projects resulted in team members exchanging experiences.

The web page expert worked with other members of the team who became more comfortable working with their students as they developed web pages.

Effective teams were continually discussing and reviewing their teaching and learning practice, considering essential questions related to their practice and conducting informal action research. Some teams are formalising an action research approach. Teachers are increasing their understanding of teaching and learning and developing a variety of ways of learning.

Bacchus Marsh Primary School — Working together to improve staff morale

The vision behind the teams

In 1998 and 1999 the school participated in the Staff Morale Project run by the Central Highlands Wimmera Region. This provided an opportunity to work with Neville Johnson and to put some of his ideas into practice. The key message from the project was that improving staff morale is not something that you can do and then put away. It requires an ongoing commitment from all staff to do things differently — to re-culture the school.

With this in mind the whole staff agreed, after much discussion, that the best way to improve morale was to work together in teams on projects that had a positive impact on their teaching.

Two projects with a whole school focus were identified:

- developing school values, vision, mission statement
- developing a whole school behaviour plan.

At a whole school residential conference in 1999, staff again worked with Neville Johnson to investigate what made high performing teams.

Team approach to staff morale

Teams were established for most areas of work within the school. Membership of teams was negotiated to ensure skills and work styles complemented each other. Team members collaborated and took collective responsibility for the work of the team. The principal and assistant principals were members, but not necessarily leaders of teams.

At the same time the focus of staff meetings was changed from information giving to allow teams time to work on projects. All meetings had a purpose, an agenda and set finishing times. Agendas stated times for each item, encouraging people to keep to the point. When decisions were to be made, a short introduction was provided to the whole staff by a team leader then small groups discussed the issue and reported back to the whole staff in a plenary session. This approach allowed everyone to have a say rather than meetings being dominated by a few people. When staff meetings were for teams to work on their projects, teams that finished early were encouraged to invest in themselves rather than find other work to do around the school.

The initial focus for teams was the development of school values, vision, mission statement. The whole staff discussed values including examples from industry. Small groups ranked the values provided then the whole staff selected four values. These were discussed with the school community to gather further input. The process resulted in a shared understanding and commitment to the school values — Respect, Learning, Teamwork and Integrity. This process was also used to develop a school vision and mission statement.

The next task for teams was the development of a whole school behaviour plan. The Welfare Committee took responsibility for leading development of the plan. This involved providing professional development for the whole staff and leading staff discussions. Staff agreed to trial the plan and to provide regular feedback to the Welfare Committee.

Data from the Staff Opinion Survey shows that staff morale has improved over time. All members of teams feel valued, take responsibility for team outcomes and feel their views will be listened to. Staff Meetings have become working times. We continue to refine processes to enable teams to be more efficient and cohesive. The culture of the school has been changed so that it is a much more positive and collaborative environment to work in.



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