

# Stop Sliding Away...

You know the feeling. You have created the structures for collaboration in your school. You have provided teams with the time and tools to collaborate, defined the work, and checked for consensus every step of the way. You have done all the right things to ensure teams will flourish in your school and yet the teams simply aren't producing the kinds of results you expected. You feel like the chorus in the Paul Simon song and despite your best efforts it is all "just slip slidin' away." It is not uncommon to create the structures necessary for successful teams only to see them slip away during implementation.

It is a flawed assumption to believe that the presence of the right structures alone will ensure teams are successful. Creating schedules that set aside designated and protected time, encouraging the use of consensus-building processes, and requiring that teams create norms and write SMART goals are essential steps to creating collaborative teams, but principals must do more. Ensuring teams are successful depends on the specific actions principals take to monitor the work of teams.

## **The Principal's Role in Monitoring Teams**

In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done. In a professional learning community, monitoring begins with ensuring that every teacher regularly addresses and responds to the critical questions of learning as a member of a collaborative team. These questions—What do we want our students to know? How will we know they have learned it? What will we do when they don't learn it? What will we do if they already know it?—are the centerpiece of the work that takes place around the table of every team meeting.

How effectively each team answers these critical questions becomes one of the principal's primary monitoring responsibilities. The best way for principals to fulfill this responsibility is to have firsthand knowledge of what teams are doing on a daily basis. This requires regular communication between the principal and collaborative teams. Said another way, in order to ensure success, principals must regularly monitor the work of teams in their schools.

## **Strategies for Monitoring Teams**

One of the simplest ways principals can monitor the work of teams is to be visible and available. An effective strategy is to drop in on team meetings from time to time. During these informal and impromptu visits principals look for evidence of teams using pacing guides, analyzing common assessments, planning for interventions and sharing strategies for delivering more effective lessons. Principals watch for collaborative behaviors and focus attention on how time is spent during team meetings.

A prerequisite of effective monitoring is regular and systematic communication between principals and the teams in their schools. Teams have found countless ways to share information with principals and many routinely share minutes of team meetings on a weekly basis. Some teams use handwritten journals for this purpose, while others have incorporated email and podcasts as vehicles for communicating with their principals. Legacy High, a large suburban high school in Broomfield, Colorado, uses specially designed electronic templates to report progress and keep absent team members in the loop. The templates also serve as an archival record of the team's work.

Encouraging reflection and self-assessment can be powerful ways to monitor teams. Several excellent rubrics describing the various stages of team development are available. Two that come to mind immediately (Graham and Ferriter, 2008 and DuFour, et al., 2010) provide principals with concrete blueprints for monitoring the development of teams. Allowing teams to reflect on their progress keeps them focused on developing their own expertise and provides an opportunity for principals to monitor teams through the eyes of the team members themselves.

Principals can monitor teams by asking questions designed to gather evidence that teams are focused on the right work. District 96 (Buffalo Grove, Illinois) teams bring results of their assessments to regularly scheduled meetings with their principal. In these meetings, the principal asks three important questions: (1) Which students are proficient? (2) Which students are not proficient? and (3) How is the team providing more time and support for the students who have not yet met proficiency? The questions not only serve as a way to monitor teams, but also allow the principal to engage in discussions about teaching and learning, gain firsthand knowledge of student progress, and help teams reallocate and match resources to ensure all students learn.

Perhaps the most effective way to monitor teams is through the review of work products and artifacts. Schools have found that creating TUFF (Teachers United For Focus) notebooks facilitates the collection of artifacts. Each TUFF notebook contains sections for the team's SMART goal(s) for the year, a copy of team norms, meeting agendas and minutes, and examples of any work products the team has generated in response to the critical questions of learning. The TUFF notebook is kept in a central place so it is always available for review by the principal and members of the team. Teachers in Allen Parrish, Louisiana, have found that TUFF notebooks are an effective way to keep their teams focused on student learning while simultaneously collecting examples of the work products and artifacts generated during team meetings. Finally, some schools have adopted the use of specific tools designed to structure team meetings and agendas. In *The Collaborative Teacher*, a graphic organizer is described as one such tool. The organizer has a place for teams to record their SMART goal(s), team norms, purpose for the meetings, and an outline of the team's past work. The organizer also includes a section titled "Next Steps." Teams are encouraged to end each meeting by describing (in writing) what was accomplished and what they plan to accomplish the next time they meet. At the very bottom of the planning form there is space for teams to identify an area of concern, request specific training, or simply ask a question of their principal. Once forwarded to the principal, this organizer establishes an effective way for principals and teams to communicate.

We often hear about the importance of creating the structures for teams, but principals must also monitor the work of teams. Effective principals recognize that "a critical step in moving an organization from rhetoric to reality is to establish the indicators of progress to be monitored, the process for monitoring them, and the means for sharing the results throughout the organization" (DuFour, et al., 2010, p. 27). Instead of allowing teams to "slip slide away," these principals keep their teams on solid ground by regularly monitoring the work of teams in systematic ways.

#### References:

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work™*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Graham, P. & Ferriter, B. (2008, Summer). One step at a time. National Staff Development Council. *Journal of Staff Development*, 29(3), p. 38.
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