



HARVARD EDUCATION PUBLISHING GROUP
[Harvard Education Press »](#) [Harvard Educational Review »](#)

- [Permission to Reprint](#)



Volume 27, Number 6
 November/December 2011

Rating Your Teacher Team

Five conditions for effective teams

By VIVIAN TROEN and KATHERINE C. BOLES

Schools are now playing catch-up in the world of teaming, but just putting teachers into teams doesn't always yield the hoped-for outcomes. While most teams are able to accomplish low-level tasks such as organizing field trips and planning bulletin board displays, they often fail to accomplish the higher-level goal of improving teaching and learning.

We have some ideas about why this is so. In over 15 years of studying teacher teams, we've identified major barriers to effective teaming, as well as five conditions for effective teams.

Barriers to Collaboration

While teacher teams may have energy and enthusiasm, team members typically lack the skills, tools, and support structures that would allow them to orchestrate significant pedagogical and curriculum changes through the collaborative work of the team. Principals generally lack the time and preparation to properly guide and supervise teacher teams. (They haven't been taught how to do it, either.) Teams are rarely if ever trained in the basic skills of team facilitation, such as time management, goal setting, development of team norms, and conflict resolution.

Teachers are expected to arrive in the classroom knowing everything they need to know in order to be good teachers. This creates a school culture that tends to prevent teachers from admitting in a group of their peers that perhaps there is a problem or condition they can't solve by themselves—one that may require outside expertise. Since teachers are a congenial bunch, caring very much that everyone gets along, they tend to avoid conflicts and dismiss or ignore alternative ways of doing things.

The cultural norm of teacher autonomy can prevent teachers from accepting another teacher's authority. "Let's share leadership" is often simply a way for individual teachers to avoid stepping into leadership roles and attempting to assert authority. Should a teacher leader step forward, the automatic response is often, "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

The result is that teacher teams often fail to make headway in improving teaching and learning because they fall into predictable pitfalls, such as poor use of common planning time, failure to pursue expert advice, a focus on issues that are peripheral to learning, absence of clear goals, or lack of team accountability for the success of all their students.

Teams support the improvement of classroom instruction and student achievement when they are able to: Focus on instruction; connect instruction to curriculum; connect instructional talk to classroom practice by using assessment data; and work collaboratively on planning lessons and conducting classroom observations.

Good Teams Exhibit Five Conditions

In our experience, very few teacher teams can truly be called effective in every sense. The reasons for this are many and vary from school to school, but too often teams are mandated by central office and implemented by school principals whose knowledge of the complexities of team building is minimal. To help, we've developed a rubric for evaluating the effectiveness of teams based on five conditions for effective teaming (see "[Rubric for Task Focus:](#)

Condition #1). Within each condition are several levels of development that can help determine where a team's overall effectiveness lies along a broad spectrum.

Condition #1: Task Focus

Is the team's task well defined, and does it focus on improving student learning? At the lowest level of development, a team focuses most of its energies and attention on logistics or on a particular crisis or pressing school need; team goals do not have student learning at their center. At the highest level of development, team meetings are directed toward improving the planning and measuring of student progress. Team conversations are dialogues that help team members develop new understandings about teaching and learning, and teacher learning is seen as an ongoing process that directly contributes to student achievement.

Condition #2: Leadership

Does the team encourage leadership for all its members? A low-level team is indicated when leadership roles are assumed reluctantly, or forced upon a member, or assumed by the strongest or most vocal person on the team. A higher level of functioning occurs when potential leadership roles are distributed so that they are available to all team members in one way or another, and at one time or another. In high-functioning teacher teams, individual teacher instructional expertise is valued and utilized by all team members, veteran and novice alike.

Condition #3: Collaborative Climate

Is the team generating an environment where trust, communication, and synergy are apparent? It's easy to avoid conflicts by never confronting serious issues and achieve harmony by simply allowing only the more dominant members to have a voice in conversations. Successful teams do not shy away from conflict; rather, they understand that there are benefits to be gained from conflict resolution. Teams must find ways to legitimately and strategically make critiques within the team.

Condition #4: Personal Accountability

Is there an expectation of performance improvement for both the team and the individual – an *articulated* expectation of accountability? Do team members fail to complete tasks or deliver unacceptable levels of quality? In a team that is functioning at mid-level, you might expect variable quality, with some assigned tasks completed well. In those teams, individuals may hold themselves accountable, but there is no process in place to hold individuals accountable for accomplishing team goals. In teams at the highest level, all members complete tasks effectively, the team holds all members accountable for their performance, and all members share responsibility for the team's success and for the success of all its students.

Condition #5: Structures and Processes

Can the team articulate its structure and the team processes it uses to accomplish its goals? A team cannot function well if its goals are poorly defined or if articulated goals are arrived at merely to satisfy low expectations of the team's abilities to affect student learning. Effective teams have a process for deciding if certain tasks are best accomplished by individuals or by the group, and the team *continuously* adapts plans and processes to ensure that the team's focus is on students' learning needs.

When teachers, working in teams, recognize the value of teacher leadership, engage in systematic high-level instructional talk, and have the opportunity to improve practices collaboratively and in concrete forms, they develop team loyalty, trust, and new feelings of responsibility and accountability. The collective team is responsible to each other and for all the team's students. The result is improved teaching and learning.

Katherine C. Boles is senior lecturer on education and director of the Learning and Teaching Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She and Vivian Troen are the coauthors of The Power of Teacher Teams (Corwin Press, 2011).