

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

What is Collaboration, Anyway?

One of the current buzz words in professional development and classroom implementation is *collaboration*. We collaborate about this and we collaborate about that. However, many times it is hard to tell the difference between a collaborative work effort and a lunch session where colleagues are simply discussing today's set of problems and solutions.

In Chapter 5 of his 2009 book, Leading Change in your School – How to Conquer Myths, Build Commitment, and Get Results, Douglas Reeves identifies Myth #4 in change leadership as the fact that people love to collaborate. Specifically, he states that in many cases there is no evidence that teachers, or schools in general, implement collaborative efforts any differently than congenial efforts. Reeves says that effective collaboration “requires time, practice, and accountability.” He also indicates that without specific agendas, clearly articulated expected results, and minutes following each collaborative effort, there is no difference from a congenial work group. Reeves contends that in many cases, teachers are told to collaborate, but not taught what collaboration means.

The first step, then, is to define collaboration. The *Wikipedia* definition states:

“Collaboration is a recursive process where two or more people or organizations work together in an intersection of common goals — for example, an intellectual endeavor that is creative in nature — by sharing knowledge, learning, and building consensus. Structured methods of collaboration encourage introspection of behavior and communication. These methods specifically aim to increase the success of teams as they engage in collaborative problem solving. Forms, rubrics, charts and graphs are useful in these situations to objectively document personal traits with the goal of improving performance in current and future projects.”

It is apparent that in order to collaborate, we must have a clear focus, a statement of expectations, and a requirement to report progress. Notice in the definition that there is the intent to build consensus. The need to build consensus relates to the focus on a particular task. *We're going to keep working until we reach consensus on... what?* That question must be answered in a clear statement. How we use the results of the collaboration is important in knowing how to construct our expectations and how to evaluate and report progress.

Without being taught *how* to collaborate it is not likely that we will, in fact, effectively collaborate. We have seen classrooms that attempt to organize students into collaborative groups. Time and again we are disappointed when the groups build no common sense of purpose or quality of product. The same thing occurs in some teacher groups. Instead of building consensus and working toward a common focus, the group decides to “agree to disagree” and divides and conquers the task with products that bear little resemblance to each other. It just might be that both the students and the teachers do not really know how to collaborate.

Many districts have embraced the idea of professional learning communities, which depend upon collaboration, but then are frustrated with the “non-progress” of the professional learning communities in their school. Once again, this is most likely because teachers have simply been assigned groups and told to collaborate, but not taught how. Richard DuFour, who has written extensively on professional learning communities, tells us that collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results.

In order to get the results desired from collaboration, we must be taught how to collaborate and be allowed to practice. This training should appear *first* on your list of staff development activities. Learning can then be applied in collaborative groups, with meaningful results.