

family

A D V O C A C Y

PO Box 502
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

Record

137

File Number

10110

Author: Thousand, Jacqueline Villa, Richard

Title: Interpersonal skills for effective collaboration

Original source: IMPACT Volume 4 Number 3

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/01/91

Publisher info: -

Abstract

This is a very brief article but it manages to cover in some detail the skills required by a group of people to work together collaboratively in a team and the necessity of having these skills to be effective as a team. **Keyword: Community development**

Interpersonal Skills for Effective Collaboration

by Jacqueline Thousand and Richard Villa

Within the school restructuring movement, collaborative teams and teaming processes have come to be viewed as vehicles for inventing the solutions which traditional bureaucratic school structures have failed to conceptualize.

Collaborative team structures bring together people of diverse backgrounds and interests so they may share knowledge and skills to generate new methods for individualising learning, without the need for the current dual systems of general and special education.

It is not enough to merely assemble a group of individuals to form a collaborative team. For a collaborative team to function effectively, members must know and use small group interpersonal skills that facilitate collaboration. Of course, people are not born with group interaction skills, nor do these skills magically appear when needed. Additionally, few adults have had the opportunity to receive the kind of instruction and practice in small group interpersonal skills that many of our children and young adults now receive in schools and colleges in which co-operative group learning and partner learning structures are routinely employed (Villa & Thousand, 1992). As a consequence, many newly formed school-based collaborative teams will include individuals, who have never been required to work as part of a team, and, therefore, lack the collaborative skills to do so.

The good news is that collaborative skills can be learned and that learning how to collaborate is not much different from learning how to play a game, or ride a bicycle built for two. The team creates opportunities for members to see the need for the skills, learn how and when the skills, should be used, practice the use of the skills, and discuss how well they are using the skills (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984).

M Determining Needed Collaborative Skills

Interpersonal skills in trust building, communication, leadership, creative problem solving, decision making, and conflict

management have been identified as important to the success of collaborative team efforts. Four levels of social skills that team members use at various stages of group development (Johnson et al., 1984) are:

Forming: initial trust building skills needed to establish a collaborative team.

Functioning: communication and leadership skills that help manage and organise team activities so that tasks are completed and relationships are maintained.

Formulating: skills needed to stimulate creative problem solving and decision making, and to create deeper comprehension of unfamiliar information.

Fermenting: skills needed to manage controversy and conflict of opinions, search for more information (e.g. obtain technical assistance), and stimulate revision and refinement of solutions.

Individuals on a collaborative team will be at a variety of different levels in their collaborative skills. However, it can be expected that in the beginning, newly established teams will need to focus on the *forming* skills, which (a) build trust and facilitate members' willingness to share their ideas, resources, and feelings and (b) ensure that team members are present and oriented to working together.

As the team continues to meet, members will need to practice their functioning skills. The most effective communication and leadership behaviors at this juncture are those that help team members to send and receive information, to stay "on task", to discover effective and efficient work procedures, to create a pleasant and friendly work atmosphere, and to encourage team members to assume individual responsibility for effective team work rather than expecting someone else (e.g., the principal, the specialist) to do it.

The formulating skills allow for high quality products and productivity. Teams will want to explore and receive training in specific models or methods of decision making and problem solving such as brainstorming (Osborn, 1963) and Parties' (1988) creative problem-solving process.

Performance of *fermenting* skills is evidence that collaborative team members have succeeded in recognising controversy and conflict as opportunities to uncover divergent perspectives for the purpose of creating new solutions. The competence and confidence of individual team members in handling conflicts increases as a function of a positive attitude toward and an appreciation for differences of opinion within the team.

Structuring the Practice of Collaborative Skills

Knowing what a particular collaborative skill looks and sounds like and why it is important in no way guarantees that members will know how to or choose to practice and subsequently master the skill. Three assumptions relate to the practice of interpersonal skills within teams. The first assumption is that other team members are critical to skill development. Their support and feedback determine whether skills are practised correctly and often enough to be performed naturally and automatically. The second assumption is that peer pressure from team members and administrators to practice collaborative skills must be balanced with support for actually doing so. When unskilled team members (e.g., a dominant person, a person afraid of speaking, a person who fails to carry out homework, a person who fails to understand ideas) are present, other team members are responsible for communicating both "We want you to practice this specific collaborative skill" and "How can we help you?" Conversely, each team member must learn how to identify and ask for support in practising collaborative skills. A final assumption is that there is a direct relationship between the frequency of collaborative interactions and the number of team members with highly developed interpersonal competence. Further, the more skilled the team members, the more productive and fun team meetings will be.

In effective teams, members talk about and understand their norms, the group's common beliefs about appropriate behavior for members. They structure time to agree upon a written list of group norms or rules and discuss, how, when and why they should be applied. During the discussion, the team should not only identify desired behavior, but define and offer examples of the behaviors and share reasons why these behaviors are so important to their group's functioning. Norms are important to groups because they help to equalise the influence among group members. Both timid and powerful members gain from setting mutually agreed-upon norms because they bring regularity and control into the group without any one person having to apply personal power to direct interpersonal interactions. Some typical norms include: "Everyone on the team should participate", "We should start and end meetings on time", and "We should use first names when addressing one another", and "We should not use foul language."

When a team member's behavior becomes incessant and distracting to the group, direct confrontation should be initiated. If it is judged that the individual who is going to receive the negative feedback will positively respond, any member may initiate the feedback process. If however, it is judged that the individual will be embarrassed or angered, or that the feedback will escalate the behavior, a supervisor or a team member who has a positive relationship with the person should offer the feedback privately.

There are several ways team members and administrators can encourage the practice of interpersonal skills and norms. First, all members can and should try to model desired social skills. Second, any team member may stop the group at any time to describe a needed behavior and ask the team members to perform it. For example, a member might say, -- There seems to be a lot of interrupting. I think we need to slow down and listen more closely to what each of us has to say. How about if we observe a new norm - - after someone finishes talking, we all count off two seconds in our heads and only speak after that time?" Another method is to establish group norms, which are regularly examined and modified to meet the group's changing

interpersonal dynamics. Among these norms should be a "policing" norm which sets an expectation that members will enforce all other norms immediately after a violation. Teams may wish to create and assign a specific role of "norm enforcer" to legitimize and guarantee attention to norm violations. Enforcement needs to become as consistent as possible and may require outside intervention, such as coaching by a supervisor, the arrangement of formal training in collaborative skills for all team members, or the establishment of collaboration as an expected and inspected job function (Villa, Thousand, Paolucci Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1990). Perhaps the most effective way of facilitating acquisition is to target two or three specific collaborative skills for practice during each team meeting and to discuss at the end of the meeting how- often and how well members demonstrated the skills.

Conclusion

It is in regular face-to-face interchanges among members of a team that the creative work of teams occurs. Interpersonal skills for collaboration are important elements of an effective team process. Teams that are successful consciously work to build capacity in interpersonal skills of trust building, communication, leadership, creative problem solving, decision-making, and conflict management. Teams that can learn to give support and feedback to members regarding the development of these interpersonal skills are sure to improve team effectiveness. Moreover, as adults demonstrate new skills, they are valuable models of collaboration for students who will be the future citizens of the highly complex and interdependent 21st-century global community to come.

Note: **This article is extracted** and adapted, with permission,

From a chapter, *Co-operative Teams-A Powerful Tool in School Restructuring*, to appear in Villa, R, Thousand, J. Stainback, W, & Stainback. S. Restructuring for caring and effective education. An administrative Guide to creating heterogeneous schools

Baltimore: Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. (P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624).

References

- Johnson D.W. Johnson. WT, Holubec, E, & Roy, P. (1984). Circles of learning Arlington, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.**
- Osborn. A. (1963). Applied Imagination. New York: Schribners.**
- Parnes, S. J. (1988). Visionizing State of the art process for encouraging innovative excellence East Aurora NY: D.O.K. Publishers.**
- Villa, R. & Thousand, J. (1992). Student collaboration: An essential for curriculum delivery in the 21st century. In S. Staffiback & W. Stainback (eds.). Curriculum considerations in inclusive classroom (pp. 117-142). Baltimore: Paid FL Brookes Publishing Co. Villa, R_ Thousand, J, Paolucci-Whitcomb, P, & Nevin, A. (1990). In search of new paradigms for collaborative consultation. Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation 1(4), 279-292**

Jacqueline Thousand is a Research Associate Professor with the Center for Developmental Disabilities, University of Vermont, 499C Waterman Bldg., Burlington, VT 05405. Richard Villa is Director of Instructional Services for the Winooski School District in Vermont.