



Tool #10: Working in Teams

Every change effort should be pursued through a collaborative team process.^{viii}

Thomas Harvey

Because we are adults, it is assumed that we understand what is meant by the word “team,” and that we understand the principles that underlie effective teaming. Because of this false assumption, teams are frequently unable to analyze their processes and intervene with strategies that promote team health. Rather, they tend to believe that if certain team members resign (or are removed), the team will be operational.

This tool is designed to explain the characteristics of an effective team and suggest ways to use those characteristics to continually assess and address team health.

Team versus Group

When an identifiable group of people are working together face-to-face toward a common goal and are interdependent upon each other to realize that goal, they may be referred to as a *team*. If any of these factors are missing, they may simply be a *group* of individuals that come together with their own agenda and no common purpose.

Team Size

Six to twelve members is the ideal team size. Fewer than six may not provide enough variety of ideas and more than twelve tend to split into subgroups that are likely to undermine the concept of teaming.

Team Members

While most school teams are selected to represent constituencies (academics, career/technical, parents, community, and students) schools may want to select team members who represent key decision-making categories, if creating change is the goal. One person may represent more than one category and more than one person may represent each category. Voluntary participation is the most productive. Members typically fall into one or more of the following categories:

- *Decision Maker* – Senior staff, administrator, and/or district representative;
- *Stakeholder* – Staff/student who will be required to carry out the change or be directly affected by the change;
- *Expert* – Someone who has knowledge about the issues and/or the change process;
- *Supporter* – Someone committed to seeing that the change occurs;
- *Resister* – Someone who likes the status quo and is dubious about the proposed change; and,
- *Facilitator* – A task-oriented individual with good people skills who has no vested interest in the change but is interested in making the process work.



Characteristics of Effective Teams

The following table lists the 17 characteristics of an effective team based on a review of the literature completed by Thomas R. Harvey and Bonnie Drolet and documented in *Building Teams, Building People*.^{ix} The table also details the research principles that underlie each characteristic and questions for teams to use to analyze their “team health.”

The 17 Characteristics of an Effective Team

<i>Characteristic:</i>	<i>Common Identity/Tenets</i>
<i>Underlying Principle(s):</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective teams tend to be purpose driven. ▪ When individuals hold in common a sense of where they are heading, they are more likely to acquire a greater sense of being a team. ▪ Established tenets tend to provide teams with a collective consciousness.
<i>Reflection Questions:</i>	<p>Why does this team exist? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>What is our statement of belief toward which we can all work? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

<i>Characteristic:</i>	<i>Common Tasks</i>
<i>Underlying Principle(s):</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Groups tend to need a common task to be a cohesive unit. ▪ An organizational vision that describes a common task for its members tends to give team members a sense of direction.
<i>Reflection Questions:</i>	<p>What do we do together? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>What common tasks do we share? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>



Characteristic: Sense of Potency and Success

- Underlying Principle(s):**
- Groups convinced that they are successful, or that they have the capacity to succeed, are more likely to act as cohesive teams.
 - Positive environments that emphasize success tend to foster success.

Reflection Questions:

What are our successes? _____

Do we have the potency to effect change? _____

Do we create a positive environment that emphasizes success? _____

Characteristic: Team Members

- Underlying Principle(s):**
- Groups who share a clear and explicit knowledge of the persons who are and are not a part of the group are more likely to function as a team.

Reflection Questions:

Who constitutes the group? _____

Who attends and participates? _____

Characteristic: Individual Contributions

- Underlying Principle(s):**
- In effective teams, it is usual for each person to have a role and for everyone to know what that role is.
 - In effective teams, members perceive their worth and value to the team and their importance is publicly recognized.

Reflection Questions:

What is each person's role and skills? _____



How do we publicly recognize the important role of each member?

Characteristic: Balanced Roles

Underlying Principle(s):

- Effective teams tend to spread out the tasks rather than limiting participation to a few.

Reflection Questions:

How do we assign tasks? _____

How does each team member know he/she is needed? _____

Characteristic: Building Trust

Underlying Principle(s):

- The probability is high that trust among team members exists when all team members demonstrate the following behaviors:
 - ✓ Interdependence
 - ✓ Consistency
 - ✓ Honesty
 - ✓ Affability
 - ✓ Extend Trust to Others
- When trust exists, you tend to have a richer organizational climate.

Reflection Questions:

To what degree do team members exhibit behaviors that demonstrate trust? _____



Characteristic: Relationships Balanced with Purpose

Underlying Principle(s):

- Social gatherings tend to be important to team building because, “when I care about you as a person, I am more likely to work with you as a team member.”

Reflection Questions: What do we do to promote a joyful environment? _____

What types of social gatherings do we plan? _____

Characteristic: Open/Direct Conflict

Underlying Principle(s):

- Where there are creative, excited people, conflicts tend to arise.
- Hidden conflicts tend to fester.
- The stronger the norms that support productive conflict, the higher the level of satisfaction tends to be.

Reflection Questions: Do we let hidden conflicts fester? _____

Do our norms support open conflict? _____

Characteristic: Common Base of Information

Underlying Principle(s):

- Access to information tends to communicate importance and inclusion.

Reflection Questions: Do we share matters of importance with all team members? _____

Do we communicate importance and inclusion by providing team members access to information? _____



Characteristic: Asking and Listening

Underlying Principle(s):

- Productive teams tend to focus on asking questions, rather than making statements.
- Groups that ask numerous questions and listen carefully tend to shorten their decision-making time.

Reflection Questions:

Do we show empathy and foster inclusion by asking questions instead of making statements to team members? _____

Characteristic: Healthy Levels of Stress

Underlying Principle(s):

- Moderate stress tends to be a source from which ideas and possibilities arise.
- Creative, productive teams tend to manage stress by not allowing it to range too high or too low.

Reflection Questions:

Does the team support a moderate amount of stress? _____

What does the team do to manage stress? _____

Characteristic: Toleration of Errors

Underlying Principle(s):

- Teams whose norms encourage innovation without fear of reprisal tend to have more energy available to meet their goals.

Reflection Questions:

Does the team foster innovation and risk? _____

Does the team tolerate errors, or does it point fingers? _____



Characteristic: Flexibility and Responsiveness

Underlying Principle(s): ▪ Strong, positive teams tend to "scan" their environment and possess the flexibility and responsiveness to enable them to change.

Reflection Questions: Are team members constantly seeking new information from both inside and outside the school? _____

Are team members responsive to new information and willing to change direction when needed? _____

Characteristic: Structure and Content

Underlying Principle(s): ▪ It is not likely that there is only one right way to structure a team.
▪ Structures tend to fail when individuals do not understand, do not accept, or do not feel fulfilled in the structure.

Reflection Questions: Do all team members understand and accept the team structure?

Do all team members feel fulfilled in the current team structure?

Characteristic: Group Maintenance

Underlying Principle(s): ▪ If misunderstandings within the group are caught while they are small, they tend to evaporate and the climate remains rich.
▪ Taking time out from tasks to debrief feelings and understandings among group members tends to produce a positive team climate.

Reflection Questions: Does the team take “time outs” throughout the course of their meeting to debrief feelings and check understandings? _____



Characteristic: **Outside Forces**

Underlying Principle(s):

- Strong, productive teams tend to make a careful and honest assessment of their environment.
- Teams that understand and assess their limitations are less likely to have disillusionment set in.
- Effective teams tend to operate on the middle ground.

Reflection Questions:

Does the team continually and carefully assess its environment? _____

Does the team understand its limitations such as budgetary, political, etc.? _____

Does the team avoid extremes and operate on the middle ground? _____

References

^{viii} Harvey, Thomas R. *Checklist for Change*, Second Edition. Technomic Publishing Company, Lancaster, PA. (1995), 129.

^{ix} Harvey, Thomas R. and Bonnie Drolet. *Building Teams, Building People*, Lancaster: Technomic (1994).