



WHEN TEAMS HIT ROUGH WATERS

NAVIGATE
CHALLENGES
WITH A
DEVELOPMENTAL
APPROACH

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Teaming — when done well — can make all the difference. Nearly all the teachers and leaders we work with serve on one or more teams. Yet where do we learn how to be effective team members? What common challenges do teams face? And how can a developmental approach help teams thrive?

As part of our work in schools and districts, we have the gift of facilitating developmental teacher leadership institutes. These institutes focus on helping teacher leaders understand adult development. Participants learn how to grow other adults and themselves, and they hone practices conducive to good teaming.

In one of our institutes this past

year, we asked participants what they did when difficulties arose on their teacher teams. One senior teacher with 15 years of teaching experience said, “I understand how important teams are and how they make the school function better. And it seems natural to me that whenever you work with a group of people, there will be difficulties. But isn’t it easier to just keep working and ignore the difficulties that arise? Not only is it hard to address those situations, but I don’t even know where to begin. No one has ever taught us how to work through challenges as teammates.”

In this article, we address the painful challenges many adults encounter when working in teams. We discuss how adult developmental

theory can help us better understand why teaming can be challenging for adults and how to support teaming as a developmental practice.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

In our teacher leadership institutes, we focus on teaching teacher leaders about adult development (that is, how to understand and build their own and other’s capacities) and what we call pillar practices (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2016).

Let’s look at each of these in turn. (For a more in-depth discussion of these concepts, see “The DNA of development: A new model for school change focuses on adult learning” in the June 2018 issue of *The Learning Professional*.)

ADULT DEVELOPMENT: FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING

Nearly 40 years of research suggest that adults make meaning of the world with one of four qualitatively different developmental ways of knowing (Drago-Severson, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018b; Kegan, 2000). A way of knowing dictates how a person will make sense of one's relationships, roles, and responsibilities and what a person believes constitutes an effective teacher, leader, and team member.

Each way of knowing has both strengths and growing edges. If someone is offered developmental supports and challenges, he or she can develop greater internal capacities over time. Teaming is a structure that can help adults grow. This is important and hopeful.

Adults with different ways of knowing experience teaming quite differently. *Instrumental knowers*, for example, are most comfortable when following what they see as the "right" team rules and procedures but are challenged when considering perspectives other than their own.

Socializing knowers orient strongly to the feelings, needs, and approval of teammates and, as such, are challenged by conflict. *Self-authoring knowers* thrive when they have opportunities to share their expertise, perspectives, and ideas. Their challenge is learning how to critique their own ideologies or the ways they think things should go.

Finally, *self-transforming knowers* delight in exploring the complexities and paradoxes of an issue but may have a harder time working with team members whom they experience as more rigid. No matter one's way of knowing, taking developmental

diversity into account can help team members manage difficult situations and enhance team effectiveness.

THE PILLAR PRACTICES

Teaming is also one of the four foundational pillar practices for collaboration we highlight in our work (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018b), along with providing adults with leadership roles, engaging in collegial inquiry, and coaching and mentoring with developmental intentionality.

These four practices put a developmental spin on collaborative initiatives that are regularly employed in schools. Implementing them can help educators accomplish logistical tasks, such as learning new curricula or overseeing the completion of testing criteria.

However, they also support adults by creating safe spaces for reflecting, examining assumptions, broadening perspectives, collaborating, and even engaging in productive conflict (see table on p. 56).

WHAT WOULD YOU DO AND SAY?

In our work with educators, when we address the possibilities and challenges of teaming, the following questions typically surface:

- How can we help team members be more vulnerable and open to hearing others and their ideas?
- How can we make change OK and not scary?
- How do we work with team members who seem negative or unmotivated?
- How can we work with people

who seem closed off to change?

- How can we communicate better? Within grade-level teams? Vertical teams? District teams? Between buildings?
- How can I stand up more often and say what I'm honestly thinking and feeling to teammates?

In our experience, learning about adult development, the four ways of knowing, and the pillar practices can help educators not only better understand some of what drives these questions but also differentiate supports and solutions accordingly.

In addition, practicing the application of a developmental lens through role-playing can be a powerful support. With that in mind, we offer several dilemmas below that readers will probably be familiar with. With a partner, select one of them, with one partner playing the role of team leader and the other acting as the team member demonstrating a challenging behavior. Debrief for about five minutes after the role play and then switch roles.

The new team leader can either choose to retry the same dilemma, with the intention of diving deeper, or select a new one.

As you read through these dilemmas, think about what you would say and do if you were faced with one of these situations. Review the descriptions in the tables on pp. 56-57. How might that information guide you?

Dilemma 1: THE COMPLAINER

During a team meeting, you're discussing a new initiative that the district has rolled out. One teacher expressed during the past two team

TEAMING AND FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING			
WAY OF KNOWING	EXPERIENCE OF TEAMING	SUPPORTS FOR GROWTH	CHALLENGES (Stretches for growth)
Instrumental knowers	Are supported when the correct rules or procedures are adhered to; are challenged when considering other team members' perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish guidelines for teamwork. Provide a clear timetable and concrete goals and due dates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities to consider alternative paths to reach team goals. Model flexibility and acceptance. Encourage dialogue that extends past the right solution and stretches thinking by considering other viewpoints.
Socializing knowers	Orient toward gaining approval from valued others, team leaders, and colleagues. Are challenged by conflict or a difference of opinion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide opportunities to share individual perspectives in pairs before sharing with the whole team. Provide guidance from the team leader when determining the best ways to accomplish a goal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model that a difference of opinion doesn't destroy personal relationships. Challenge them to accept conflicting points of view as part of teamwork. Encourage them to voice their perspective, and have the team make space for this. Support them in creating their own standards for evaluating effective teamwork.
Self-authoring knowers	Feel supported by learning from multiple perspectives. Appreciate opportunities to evaluate initiatives. Need space to share their own perspectives and engage in dialogue about proposals. Are challenged when asked to critique their own perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create the opportunity for them to identify and share their own goal for teamwork. Engage in discussing all possible ways to accomplish a goal before making a decision. As a team, analyze and critique all ideas when considering how to accomplish a given task. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support different approaches to the process of exploring a problem. Encourage them to identify and pursue goals even if they're not their original ideas. Create opportunities for them to critique their own perspectives. Invite them to serve in the role of facilitator in difficult team discussions rather than as the leader.
Self-transforming knowers	Are both supported and challenged by diversity. Value multiple perspectives, seek collegial exchange, and harmonize multiple points of view. Seek to engage in deep exploration of contradictions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies within teams, schools, themselves, and peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build teams with adults who have diverse experiences and perspectives (in terms of age, gender, race, sexuality, and experience). Create opportunities for making long-term goals that orient toward the common good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide space and time for discussion and exploration of paradoxes and contradictions. Challenge them to be patient and allow others to work at their own pace.

Source: Drago-Severson, 2009. Adapted with permission.

meetings that there are “too many changes” and “not enough support.” After the meetings, and sometimes even during them, she talks disparagingly about coworkers, teammates, students, and parent involvement.

Dilemma 2: THE SLACKER

As a team, you've distributed the work of planning the upcoming field trip among all your teammates. Everyone has done his or her part except for the person who was supposed to coordinate

the bus. Now you may have to cancel or reschedule this trip. This is not the first time he has proven unreliable.

Dilemma 3: THE OVERACHIEVER

A new young hire on your team

PILLAR PRACTICES AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT		
PILLAR PRACTICE	DESCRIPTION	HOW IT SUPPORTS ADULT DEVELOPMENT
Teaming	Adults collaborate on curriculum, literacy, technology, teaching, and diversity teams to increase individual and organizational learning.	Adults question their own and other people’s assumptions while sharing perspectives and challenging their own and other’s thinking.
Providing leadership roles	An invitation for teachers to share authority and ideas with other colleagues and leaders.	Supports adults in uncovering their assumptions and testing new ways of working in current and new roles.
Collegial inquiry	Purposeful dialogue aimed at examining one’s own and others’ beliefs.	Supports adults by listening to and learning from their own and others’ perspectives.
Mentoring	Learning from another colleague in the supportive and more private way of 1:1 coaching.	Supports adults by broadening perspectives, examining assumptions, and sharing expertise and leadership.

Source: Drago-Severson, 2009. Adapted with permission.

is working very hard. When she does more than she signed up for, veteran teachers on the team make comments like, “This makes the rest of us look bad.” They also make these comments behind the new teacher’s back, and they choose not to share their work with her. This is creating a rift on the team.

Dilemma 4: STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

As a team, you’re working together to interpret the curriculum. One teacher feels strongly that fractions need to be taught before decimals. Another teacher disagrees. As a grade level, you need to reach consensus. The team is divided. You don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, and you need to maintain a working relationship with all of your teammates.

Dilemma 5: THE BOAT ROCKER

As a new member of the team, you started off the year by doing what everyone else was doing. Your team is known for being consistent across all classes. However, now you have some different ideas you’d like to try. You feel your students have needs that aren’t being met by the one-size-fits-all approach. You don’t want to rock the boat, but you also value

professional autonomy. One team member is adamant about “maintaining consistency as a team.”

HOW TO RESPOND

Role-playing — with an understanding of our own and others’ ways of knowing — is a powerful strategy to engage in because it allows us to practice applying a developmental lens in ways that are less sensitive and personal.

Specifically, the following developmental questions and phrases are helpful entry points into sensitive collegial conversations and powerful tools for exploring the why behind colleagues’ actions and resistance.

- I’ve noticed that at our team meeting ...
- I feel a little nervous sharing this with you, but I respect you and our work together, so I think it’s important for me to say ...
- I’d like to share some of my experiences on the team. But before I do, I’m wondering how you are feeling about our team meetings.
- I wonder what would happen if ...
- When _____ happened, I felt _____.

- What would make our work together feel more productive for you?
- What kinds of supports do you think would be most helpful as we move forward as a team?
- What’s hardest for you about our work on the team?
- Is there anything else you think is important for me to know about the situation?

Although there are no magic words that will guarantee a swift and easy resolution to a teaming challenge, investing time into learning more about how a challenging teammate is thinking and feeling can go a long way toward improving the situation, as can expressing genuine appreciation for the things that are going well. This can help us meet people where they are — developmentally and otherwise — as we strengthen relationships, trust, and connections.

TEAMWORK AT ITS BEST

Engaging courageously in these kinds of conversations is key to leveraging teams as powerful forces for change, growth, and good. It’s essential, however, to situate them as part of a larger tapestry of developmental

leadership and collaboration (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018a, 2018b) and to recognize the ever-present press of political, economic, and societal factors — for example, how personal and group identity demographics as well as bureaucratic and accountability mandates influence group dynamics.

Developing a language and lens to understand and converse about urgent challenges is necessary — in our group norms, in the leadership and teamwork we model, and in the everyday ways we come together across lines of difference to make schools better places for students and one another.

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