

Four Activities to Jump-Start Teamwork Among Teachers and School Leaders

MindShift

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Teachers
and
school
leaders
face very
different



challenges today from even a decade ago. The pace of change is faster; there's more accountability. And the amount of content is overwhelming. To thrive, teachers see opportunities where others see only challenges. Now, more than ever before, teachers could use creative, innovative teamwork to help them ensure success.

But many teachers feel isolated in their classrooms, beholden to curriculum and state tests, but not necessarily connected to a learning community or a team to support them. That's where school communities could learn from other types of work, where teams are crucial to generating new ideas and momentum, while providing members with support when it's needed.

While it's important to select team members with the right skills, it's even more important to build, maintain and grow these skills over time. To do that, what if teachers and school leaders followed the example set by successful sports coaches? "Start-of-the-season" practice sessions and ongoing activities built into their work could be a way to jump-start and deepen team creativity, problem-solving and innovation skills.

These four activities are a great way to start building this type of creative team.

SEE THROUGH ONE ANOTHER'S EYES

Team members work together more effectively when they understand how each sees the world. Taking on the perspective of another can deepen empathy, an important part of problem-solving and design thinking. This activity can be used with new teams or with teams that haven't worked together for a while. It can be done outdoors or indoors, depending on what's available.

If heading outdoors, choose a location with a lot of activity. Once your team has arrived, ask that each member take notes in silence for 10-15 minutes on what they observe. Explain that their observations can center on dialogue they hear, colors they observe, activities they see and so on. Place no limits on what they choose to document. Afterward, share highlights from their notes, asking everyone to reflect on similarities and differences in what they observed after each person shares.

School leaders can apply what good coaches know — that strategic activities and practice sessions can help team members build new skills and strengthen existing ones.

If you choose to stay indoors, provide each team member with an image. To keep it simple, you can choose a copy of a painting, but the activity works best if the image isn't familiar to participants. The goal is to provide the team with something they have not seen before, so that they are seeing it for the first time with fresh eyes. Once again, give everyone a time limit of 10-15 minutes to work in silence. During that time, everyone should take notes on what they observe about the image. After time is up, they should share highlights from their notes. How are their observations similar or different?

Understanding how team members view the same situation or image helps give insight into how they think and process information. That knowledge helps people work together and with others outside the team.

USE FAMILIAR OBJECTS IN NEW WAYS

This activity draws on principles of design thinking, which fundamentally focuses on problem-solving, sometimes even repurposing familiar objects for new uses. To do that, flexible thinking is required. This activity can be used with new teams and with teams over time, to refresh perspectives.

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For this activity, provide your team with an abundance of inexpensive objects, like wires, pieces of colored plastic, cloth paper and sequins, as well as wood of different sizes and shapes, and so on. Pair team members up and provide each team with the materials you have provided and ask each pair to build the same thing, perhaps a tree or a face or some other familiar object. Give the pairs 15-20 minutes to create. When time is up, ask each pair to share their object and explain how they made it. Discuss similarities and differences in how they approached the process, made decisions and felt about the work.



FIND CONNECTIONS

The goal of this activity is to practice making connections among seemingly different things in order to problem-solve. Creativity and innovation often involve seeing connections where none existed. Teams can return to this activity to freshen this skill over time.

For this activity, team members work in pairs or small groups. Each group will receive an identical deck of cards prepared ahead of time. The deck should include an equal number of problem or pain point cards and observation cards. Each card should include only one pain point or problem and only one observation. If possible, work with your team members ahead of time to gather information for the cards.

Problems or pain points can include limited resources or nagging problems, but the key is to be very specific. Include roles, data and other specific and relevant information. Observations can include anything team members notice about objects, people or interactions in the school. Again, be as specific as possible. Card information should be specific and factual and free of judgment. Be sure to make enough copies of the cards so that each group or pair has an identical deck.

Ask each group to work together for 10-15 minutes. During that time, they should select a pain point or problem card, and work to identify the need associated with it. They should then select an observation card from the deck that they feel might address that need. The goal is to be creative and to draw connections in any way possible. They should do this for as many pairs of cards as they can in the time allotted. After time is up, each group should share the connections they made, and the experience of making those connections.

You can use this activity again and again with your teams as a way to jump-start mindsets for problem-solving and innovation.

CUSTOMIZE AND INNOVATE

Creativity and innovation involve improving and customizing already existing processes and experiences. With that goal in mind, ask team members to improve on any or all of these activities.

Provide some time either after they have completed one of more of these exercises and them pair up to improve or customize at least one of the exercises. To test out their ideas, have them run their activities with other teams or groups or revisit a favorite among these activities in the future. Ask them to evaluate their improvements or customizations against the originals.

Ask team members to do this anytime you introduce a new activity. It not only invites them to be creative, but it also encourages them to provide feedback in the form of innovation. When team members seek to design their own practice sessions, it can be a sign of team maturity and an understanding of what they need to be successful.

School leaders can apply what good coaches know — that strategic activities and practice sessions can help team members build new skills and strengthen existing ones. To build school teams made up of members with strong creativity, problem-solving and innovation skills, incorporate strategic activities into regular work.

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