

What Drives Collective Efficacy?

Effective teams that believe they can make a difference create the conditions to get better in four key ways.

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When teams believe and are confident in their abilities to make an impact, they tend to perform better.

This phenomenon—which is called collective efficacy—has a powerful impact to make good teams great. In education, collective efficacy influences student achievement and can create positive change in schools. But how do teams come to see themselves as high-performing? How is collective efficacy developed? And how can teams strive for it?

Collective efficacy is strengthened when increases in student achievement are realized based on the sustained efforts of high-powered teams within schools. This process—which we call *quality implementation*—involves a critical mass of people doing their best to apply and experiment with evidence-based strategies, learning whether and why the strategies worked (or didn't) within their respective contexts, and then making the necessary modifications. You know you have quality implementation when teams make what's supposed to work actually work in their schools and classrooms.



These teams do more than welcome new instructional practices into the mix. They tolerate the discomfort felt throughout the change process and work to take control, invest in their work, and shape experiences based on high expectations. Highly effective teams do not let constraints get in their way. They rally to get a critical mass behind decisions, doing the right thing, for the right reason, at the right time, while assessing the impact of their actions. They find ways to bring theory and practice together to produce positive outcomes for students—regardless of other circumstances. They go outside their comfort zones, use focused, goal-driven inquiry to improve an area of weakness, and make changes based on feedback.

Teamwork in Action

In our work supporting high-quality professional learning in schools and districts, we have witnessed how teams enhance their collective efficacy. We once observed five teams of teachers at a high school in Ontario, Canada, who were charged with closing a large achievement gap between students enrolled in applied courses (workplace-bound) and

academic courses (university-bound). These teams, each led by a teacher, identified a few evidence-based strategies on which to focus their implementation efforts, including co-constructed learning intentions and success criteria, the effective use of feedback, cross-curricular literacy instruction, and responsive, differentiated support.

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really meant, regardless of their content-area specialties. They went beyond individual opinion and conjecture to collective reflection based on evidence. They identified and solved dilemmas of practice. They were accountable to themselves and each other for their actions and shared priorities.

That spring, standardized assessment results showed that the gap in achievement between students enrolled in applied courses and students enrolled in academic courses decreased by 21 percent, due to significant gains by students in the applied track. The results were not only affirming to the teachers, but also eye-opening as the teachers realized how their efforts resulted in

As a professional learning community, teachers on each team voluntarily observed one another's practices in these areas as they worked to get better. When they discovered how to make these promising practices really work in their classrooms, the teams designed learning opportunities for the whole faculty to spread the learning throughout the school.

What struck us most about the teams at this school was that they did not hesitate to examine their current practices publicly and critically.

They spent time together trying to figure out what quality implementation

measurable increases for students in their school.

The team's quality implementation experience resulted in further refinements to their practice. The team noticed innovative and lasting improvement as what was working began to spread throughout the school. More and more teachers understood the strategies they were using with greater depth and, more important, they learned how to make them work in their respective classroom contexts. And teachers felt empowered, gaining a sense of voice and agency in school improvement efforts. When teachers got better, students got better. As student results continued to increase, so did the faculty's collective efficacy.

Mastery Experiences

As we saw in Ontario, a firm sense of collective efficacy, developed through quality implementation, is a significant contributor to successful school improvement. But how exactly do high-powered teams form positive beliefs about what they are able to accomplish?

The most effective way is through repeated successes—what we call mastery moments—because they are based on firsthand experiences (Bandura, 1977). When teams set out to accomplish a task and achieve success based on sustained efforts, it raises mastery expectations. Teams come to believe that through their combined efforts, they can accomplish future goals. They raise their expectations for future success because they experienced success in the past. We saw this in Ontario with the teacher teams. When their efforts to improve students' test scores and overall experiences in school had paid off, the teams did not become complacent and consider their job done. They continued to refine their work and look for additional ways to work together to address students' needs.

Mastery experiences build confidence and motivate teams. Drawing on four decades of scientific research on human motivation, Pink (2009) identified mastery as one of the three elements of true motivation. He defined mastery as “the desire to get better and better at something that matters” (p. 111). That desire fuels

motivational investments and persistent effort. For the high school teams in Ontario, getting better at meeting the needs of students, as evidenced by the improved achievement results, led to teachers being highly motivated to continue their work.

Four Processes That Create Mastery Experiences

In our experience, highly successful teams create the conditions for mastery by focusing on the following four processes: Learning together, cause-and-effect relationships, goal-directed behavior, and purposeful practice. Let's look at each more closely.

Learning Together

Professional team-based learning—the kind that has the goal of achieving quality implementation—requires more than just time and space for teachers to meet. The type of collaboration indicative of quality implementation is what we refer to as *joint-work*. We borrow this term from Judith Warren Little's (1990) seminal article in which she calls for a harder look at what is meant by collaboration and the circumstances that foster or inhibit it. Little notes that teachers' collaborations range from sporadic contacts among peers to "joint-work of a more rigorous and enduring sort" (p. 513). Joint-work involves teachers engaging in "deliberation over difficult and recurring problems of teaching and learning" (p. 520) in the service of finding a better way. When high-powered teams come together, they focus their time on identifying and collaboratively solving the problems that are rooted in the learning needs of their students.

These teachers' work involves an *interdependence*, where motivation to participate is based on the fact that each other's contributions are required in order to succeed. In 2002, Gully and his colleagues published a meta-analysis

demonstrating that the relationship between collective efficacy and team performance is maximized when there is greater positive interdependence among the members of the team. Little notes that joint-work is about the acceptance of shared responsibility: "Professional autonomy and discretion reside collectively with the faculty; put more forcefully, each one's teaching is everyone's business, and each one's success is everyone's responsibility" (p. 523).



Cause-and-Effect Relationships

In many school improvement initiatives, educators are more interested in results (effects) than what caused those results (implementation of evidence-based strategies). High-powered teams ensure they make direct links between cause and effect, and these "moments of insight" (Heath & Heath, 2017) become memorable mastery experiences. They do this by frequently examining evidence of student learning and ensuring their conversations help to answer questions such as: What was the impact of X? What do we see that suggests that students understand or do not understand? What patterns in students' work suggest that we should continue to teach this way—or what suggests that we need to try something else? Are we getting a year's growth for a year's input?

One team at the Ontario high school, for example, had a moment of insight during an observation in a 9th grade applied classroom.

The team had identified strategies to draw out students' inferences, including: (a) chunking a high-interest text (Joseph Boyden's *Walk to Morning*); (b) using a "What do we know?"/"What do we wonder?" chart; and (c) asking the question, "What makes you think that?" when students offered responses.

The class being observed was identified as challenging because it was offered at the end of the day and contained only boys—many of whom were identified as at-risk. Most of the



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teachers on the team taught these students in different classes throughout the day and were skeptical that the strategy could make a difference.

As the lesson played out, however, students raised their hands, offered insightful comments, took risks, made predictions and inferences, and revised their thinking aloud as they worked their way through the text. Every student contributed. When the class emptied out at the end of the day, one teacher sat for a long time deep in thought. Finally, she said, "I feel horrible. I always thought these students weren't capable. The insight they had was astounding! It sickens me that I thought they couldn't infer from texts. These strategies really worked!"

Goal-Directed Behavior

Goal-directed behavior is another key to creating the conditions for mastery in schools. However,

Pink (2009) noted that not all goals are created equal: "Goals that are devoted to attaining mastery are usually healthy" (p. 50). Performance goals, on the other hand, do little to intrinsically motivate teams. They often result in pressure on teachers' personal time, stress, and burn-out.

Mastery goals, by contrast, orient teams toward acquiring new skills, trying to understand their work, and improving their collective capacity. They are instrumental to quality implementation. Mastery goals—such as learning how to teach the skill of inference—help focus high-powered teams' attention on the learning needed to master tasks. The desire to get better and better at something intrinsically motivates teams to figure out why certain strategies did not work as intended and to pay careful attention to feedback about how to adjust their practices.

We are not suggesting that performance goals should go by the wayside. In fact, research has demonstrated that when mastery goals are met, performance goals take care of themselves (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). What is important to note is that high-powered teams know that in situations where primarily the acquisition of knowledge and skills are required, a specific challenging mastery goal should be set—not just a performance goal.

Purposeful Practice

High-powered teams understand that practice is the only way to become proficient in new skills. But what's important is the type of practice in which teams engage. Katz, Dack, and Malloy (2018) draw on research to underscore the relationship between a special kind of practice—purposeful practice—and improvement. The four key elements of purposeful practice are narrow goals, a specific area of focus, a clear plan about how to reach the goals, and the means of monitoring progress (Ericson & Pool, 2016). Katz et al. also noted that there is no reason to expect significant improvement to occur "without specific, deliberate efforts to improve using purposeful practice" (p. 65).

When teacher teams are engaged in purposeful

practice, they cannot be easily distracted. Feedback is integral to monitoring and can come from a variety of sources, including the team itself or a trusted, credible expert, such as a coach or an administrator. However, the most important source of feedback for teacher teams comes from the students they are serving. After completing his first synthesis of his research on factors that drive achievement in schools, John Hattie told us that he realized that feedback was actually *more powerful* when teachers *received* feedback from their students rather than just giving it. High-powered teams ask students what they understand and don't understand. They gather information about students' misconceptions, the errors students make, and their lack of engagement. As high-powered teams use feedback to make purposeful adjustments in their practice, learning is enhanced, improvement is realized, and efficacy increases.

Mastery and Improvement

Collective efficacy is a critical belief system for improving student outcomes. Research shows that collective efficacy matters more in relation to increasing student achievement than the neighborhoods where students come from and their level of household income (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). Teacher collective efficacy influences student achievement because greater efficacy drives key behaviors that are instrumental to quality implementation. Mastery experiences show high-powered teams that they are capable of achieving great things together. As teams recognize that their efforts are paying off, they begin to increase their confidence in each other and, as a result, push each other to do even greater things. 

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

- › If a team you're on right now is not performing as well as it should, what do you think is most hindering its progress? 
- › Of the four key processes the authors mention, which do you think is the most difficult to implement? Which is the easiest? Why?
- › Think of a time—either on a team or individually—when you felt motivated by seeing success from your efforts. How did that drive you to improve and continue your work? How did it make you feel?

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