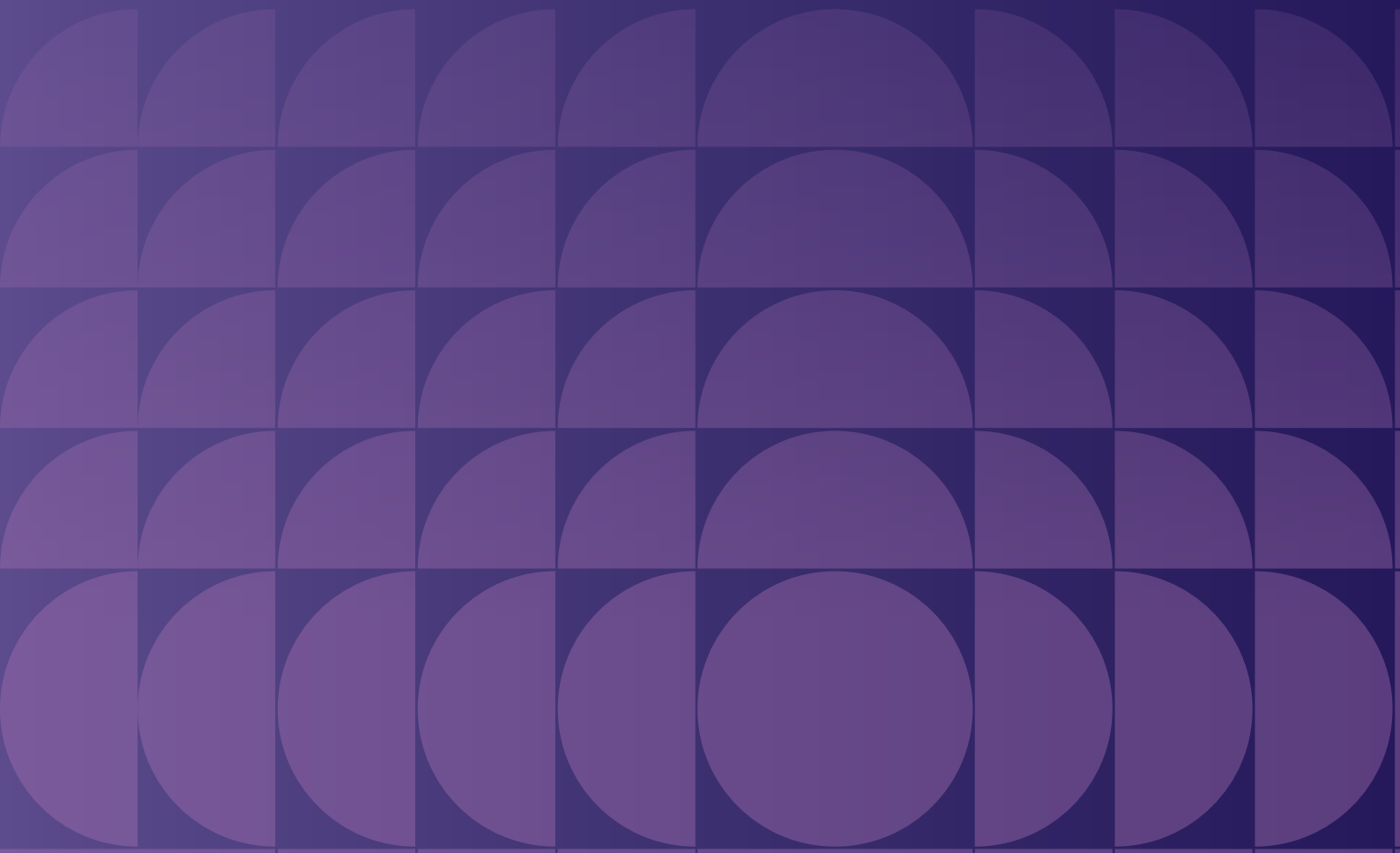


Teamwork Toolkit

Designing Teams That Deliver



Leadership is not about being in charge.
It's about taking responsibility for the environment
in which others can perform at their best.

— Cameron Schwab



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Why Teams Matter

Most schools have teams. Leaders and teachers are members of multiple teams.

But are they teams? Or teams in name only?

In increasingly complex environments, no single leader can solve the challenges schools face. Improving outcomes for students, staff and community requires **teams that can think, decide and act together.**

This is not a curriculum problem.

This is not a leadership style problem.

This is a teaming problem.

In schools, teams are everywhere—but rarely are they intentionally designed. Too often, teams are formed based on timetables, roles, or availability rather than a clear understanding of the work they are meant to do together. As a result, we seldom pause to evaluate how effectively our teams function—how they make decisions, collaborate, and deliver impact. Research is clear: when we invest time in getting the foundations right—clarifying purpose, defining the work, and establishing the essential conditions for effectiveness—team performance improves significantly. When our line of sight is student learning and wellbeing, optimising how our teams work is not optional—it is essential.

The 6 Team Conditions Framework

This toolkit is grounded in the 6 Team Conditions framework—one of the most rigorously validated models for team effectiveness. It shifts the conversation from who is in the team or how people behave to a more powerful question:

Have we created the conditions for this team to succeed?

High-performing teams are not the result of personality, goodwill, or leadership charisma.

They are the result of intentional design.

The 6 Team Conditions framework originates from the research of **Professor J Richard Hackman** and **Dr Ruth Wageman** at **Harvard University**, whose work over several decades has identified the conditions that most reliably predict team effectiveness. Their research shifted the focus from leadership style and individual behaviour to something more powerful: the design of the team and the conditions in which it operates.

The 6 Team Conditions

The **6 Team Conditions framework** identifies the conditions that reliably predict whether a team will succeed.

It includes:

The Essentials (must be in place)

- Real Team – clear boundaries, stability, interdependence
- Compelling Purpose – clear, challenging, meaningful
- Right People – skills and capacity to collaborate

The Enablers (accelerate performance)

- Sound Structure – well-designed work, clear norms
- Supportive Context – resources, data, recognition
- Team Coaching – ongoing reflection and improvement

What Makes This Model Different

“Performance is driven primarily by team design, not personality.”

1. Conditions > Personality

Most team development focuses on behaviours or relationships.

This model focuses on **designing the environment that shapes behaviour**.

2. Structure drives behaviour

If meetings are ineffective, trust is low, or collaboration is weak—the issue is usually not people, but **poorly designed conditions**.

3. It starts with the work

The anchor is not connection or collaboration—it is: **What is the work we can only do together?**

Teams exist for **interdependent work**, not information sharing.

4. Leadership = shaping conditions

Team leadership is not about directing people—it is:

“Getting the 6 conditions in great shape and keeping them that way.”

Observations of Teams in Schools

Common patterns:



Meetings dominated by updates



Lack of clarity about purpose



Leadership concentrated in individuals



Avoidance of complex issues



Collaboration without real interdependence

Red Flags: When Your Team Isn't a Team



Meetings are mostly updates



Decisions happen outside the room



Members act as representatives



Accountability is unclear



Conflict is avoided

6 Team Conditions Checklist (Self-Assessment)

This is an opportunity to assess the conditions in your team, highlighting strengths and opportunities for improvement. Rate each of the following conditions in your team, 5 being true and 1 being very untrue. High performing teams rate 4s and 5s on these conditions.

Item	1 very untrue -5 true
<p>REAL TEAM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team members are clear about who is on the team and who is not • Team members must interact, sharing information and resources to accomplish its purpose • The team stays together long enough to accomplish something meaningful relative to its purpose 	
<p>COMPELLING PURPOSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team knows what success looks like • The team feel achieving the purpose is a stretch, but not impossible • The team purpose has a meaningful impact on the lives and work of others 	
<p>RIGHT PEOPLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team members have the substantive skills to contribute to the purpose • Team members have the interpersonal skills necessary to collaborate • The team members have a range of experience and perspectives to perform and innovate • The team is neither too big, nor too small, to accomplish its work 	
<p>WORK DESIGN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The work the team performs uses members' talents and progresses the team's purpose • The team has a strong set of norms based on key task processes that guide how they work 	
<p>ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation celebrates excellent team (not just individual) performance • The team can access the data they need in a form they can use • The team get the necessary training and technical consultation • Time, space, technology, budget are readily available to the team 	
<p>TEAM COACHING</p> <p>Someone is readily available and present for coaching the team</p> <p>The individuals providing the coaching know how and when to intervene</p>	

TEAM REFLECTION: Are we a Team in name only?

Consider these questions as you reflect as a team.

1. Do we have work that requires interdependence?

2. Do we share accountability for outcomes?

3. Could this work be done individually?

4. What is the core work of this team?

5. What level of interdependence does this require?

6. Where do we spend most of our time?

7. What are we avoiding that matters most?

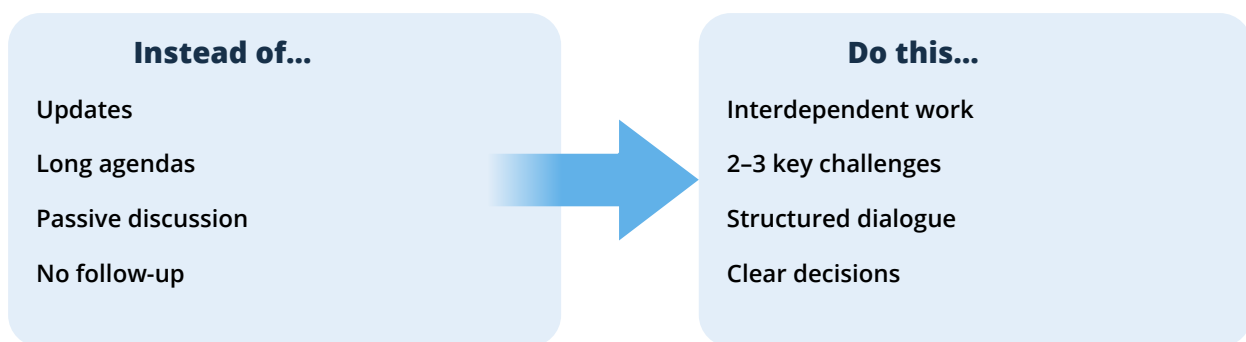
8. What strengths do we bring? What is missing?

9. What norms define how we work?

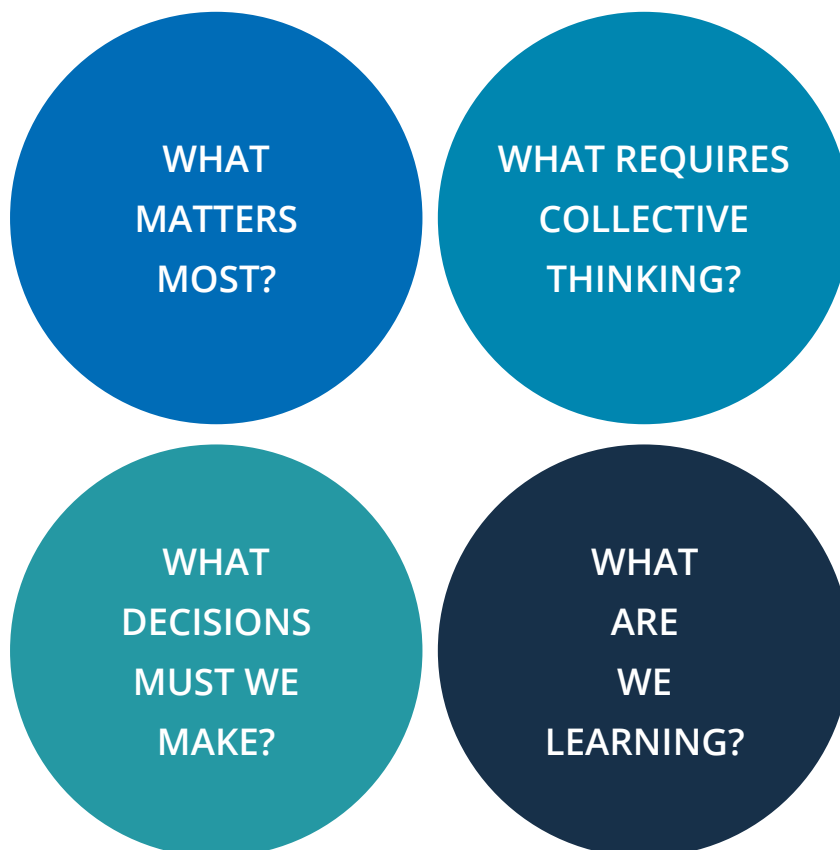
Actions to Strengthen Your Team

- Clarify the interdependent work
- Focus on 2–3 priorities
- Redesign meetings
- Establish norms
- Build reflection into practice
- Revisit team composition

Redesigning Team Meetings



Simple Agenda Considerations





The Role of the Team Coach

As schools increasingly rely on teams to lead complex work, a critical question emerges:

Who is attending to how the team works—not just what it does?

This is the role of the **team coach**.

A team coach is not the team leader, and not a facilitator of meetings.

They are someone who:

- pays attention to team dynamics and effectiveness
- helps the team reflect on how it is working
- supports the development of stronger collaboration over time

While the team leader is accountable for outcomes, the team coach is focused on **improving the team's ability to achieve those outcomes—now and in the future**.

From Activity to Effectiveness

Without coaching, teams tend to equate activity with effectiveness.

A team coach helps shift the focus to:

- Are we working on the right things?
- Are we using our collective capability well?
- Are we improving as a team over time?

This aligns directly with the idea that: **teams do not improve simply by working harder—but by working more deliberately**.

What Does a Team Coach Actually Do?

In practice, a team coach may **observe, intervene, facilitate reflection and strengthen norms and practices**

Increasingly, schools are recognising the value of developing **internal capability in team coaching**—so that reflection and improvement become part of everyday practice, not an occasional intervention.

Programs and training are available for team leaders and team coaches using the 6 Team Conditions Framework via ACELearn.

Summary of 'MORE THAN A GAME' by Cameron Schwab

Cameron Schwab's "More than a Game" (2019) explores leadership through the lens of elite sport, but its core message extends far beyond performance or winning. At its heart is the idea that leadership is not about control, authority, or results alone—it is about creating meaning, building culture, and enabling others to perform at their best.

A central theme in Schwab's work is that teams do not succeed because of talent alone, but because of the environment in which that talent operates. Leadership, therefore, is less about directing individuals and more about shaping the conditions—purpose, trust, clarity, and accountability—that allow a team to function effectively. This aligns closely with the idea that culture is not declared, but designed and lived through everyday behaviours.

Schwab emphasises that high-performing teams are built on:

- Clear and shared purpose – teams must understand why they exist and what they are working toward
- Trust and alignment – relationships matter, but must be grounded in shared responsibility
- Courage and vulnerability – leaders must be willing to confront reality, admit mistakes, and create space for learning
- Consistency of behaviour – people respond to what leaders do, not what they say

Importantly, 'More than a Game' reframes leadership as a deeply human practice. It highlights that performance and wellbeing are not competing priorities—rather, sustainable high performance comes from environments where people feel valued, challenged, and connected to something meaningful.

For leaders of teams, the implication is clear:

**The work of leadership is not to be the best performer in the team,
but to create the conditions in which the team can perform.**

Research Spotlight: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING AND THRIVING Conigrave and Palermo article

Improving outcomes for students in today's schools is complex work. Leaders are navigating increasing demands—wellbeing, equity, rapid technological change, and the need to build 21st-century capabilities in learners. These challenges cannot be addressed by individuals working in isolation; they require effective leadership teams capable of working together to lead system-wide change.

Why This Matters for Schools

Schools are increasingly focused on developing student agency, lifelong learning, and adaptability—yet these shifts require significant changes in teaching practice. This is not a technical adjustment, but an adaptive challenge, requiring educators to rethink beliefs, roles, and ways of working.

For this to happen, schools must become environments where:

- learning is continuous (for both students and staff)
- experimentation and risk-taking are safe
- collaboration is purposeful and focused

Leadership teams play a critical role in creating these conditions.

The Role of Leadership Teams

Leadership teams are a key structure for enabling a learning culture in schools. Effective teams do more than coordinate—they:

- Deliver on stakeholder expectations
- Build the capability of members to work together
- Support the learning and wellbeing of individuals

This means that leadership teams must themselves become learning systems, capable of adapting, reflecting, and improving over time.

The Shift: From Behaviour to Conditions

A common mistake in leadership is to attribute team success or failure to individuals (the “leader attribution error”). Instead, the research highlights that effectiveness is driven by six key conditions:

- A real team
- A compelling purpose
- The right people
- Sound structure
- Supportive context
- Team coaching

When these conditions are in place, teams are far more likely to engage in aligned, strategic and collaborative decision-making.

Where to Start: It Always Begins with the Work

The most important starting point is not relationships or meetings—it is the interdependent work of the team.

In schools, this means identifying:

- the 2–3 most important challenges
- the work that can only be achieved collectively
- how this connects to improving student learning and wellbeing

From here, leaders can develop a compelling purpose that:

- is clear
- matters deeply
- stretches the team's thinking and practice

To build effective teams, leaders must:

- Design teams intentionally—not by default
- Focus on a small number of high-impact priorities
- Create norms and practices that support real collaboration
- Provide access to meaningful data and feedback
- Build time for reflection and continuous improvement

Most importantly, leaders must recognise that:

The work of leadership is to create the conditions in which teachers, leaders and students can learn and thrive.

Readings Reflection:

After reading the two summaries, what might be some actions you can take to align with the research on building thriving teams?

Start	Stop	Continue

Continuing the Work

Designing effective teams is not a one-off activity—it is an ongoing leadership practice.

For schools looking to deepen this work, there are opportunities to build capability in:

- designing and (re)launching teams
- strengthening team leadership practice
- developing team coaching capability

Explore further learning opportunities via ACELearn

Explore further learning opportunities via [ACELearn](#)

Creating the conditions for learning and thriving

Nicholas Conigrave, Partner of 6 Team Conditions Australia
Dr Josephine Palermo, Partner of 6 Team Conditions Australia

I have no question that when you have a team, the possibility exists that it will generate magic, producing something extraordinary - but don't count on it. (J Richard Hackman, n.d.)



School leaders, individually and collectively, strive to improve education outcomes for their students in the face of an ever-changing context. Some of these improvement efforts have focused on embedding 21st century skills through curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and creating enabling conditions for student agency. Leading these improvements is complex adaptive work which requires leadership teams that can collaborate effectively to lead system level change. The challenge is that most leadership teams in organisations are mediocre or poor in their ability to collaborate (Wageman et al., 2008) and thus fail to exceed the expectations of their stakeholders or learn individually and collectively to improve performance. The research undertaken by Hackman and Wageman (2008) sets out the rigorous science that can support school leaders to set up or relaunch their teams for success, articulating six conditions that are deemed necessary. Our intent in this paper is to highlight the critical role leadership teams play in creating the conditions for students to thrive and learn. We encourage all school leaders to take the time to intentionally design and launch/relaunch their teams informed by the science and the art of creating high performing teams as set out in this paper.

Learning and thriving in a rapidly changing context

Australian schools today are striving to improve education outcomes for all children in the face of a rapidly changing world. Having come out of the COVID pandemic, there is a significant focus on mental health and wellbeing of children (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022). Our communities are struggling to deal with geopolitical conflict which is driving division, and cost of living pressures is widening the equity gap. In response to this changing and challenging context, the team at the Centre for Curriculum Redesign (CCR) has continued to refine its model for 21st century skills into four dimensions integrating knowledge, skills, character, and meta learning. To this they have added the drivers of motivation, identity, agency, and purpose.

The 21st century skills are designed to help educators prepare our children to face this challenging context “yet the education community is still struggling to take the first steps to embed these skills into everyday teaching and learning practices and pedagogical solutions in classrooms” (Fadel et al., 2024, p. 13). All of this is happening in a context where rapid advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) could potentially change everything. Charles Fadel and his colleagues at CCR have published a book on AI and its implications for how we educate our children. They argue that “AI magnifies the pressures schools and education systems are experiencing. Existing curricula have a bias towards just knowing, the exact area where AI is most able to outperform human beings” (Fadel et al., 2024, p. 13)

Learner agency

Learner agency and its precursor, student voice, are not new in education. Learner agency is central to the idea of child-centred learning which has been the espoused theory of many education systems in several decades. The focus on learner agency is becoming

more than rhetoric in education systems that are placing it as a central aspect of their strategy to create an education where all children can learn and thrive (South Australian Certificate of Education [SACE] Board, n.d.a.). Learner agency is crucial if we are to support our children to become life-long learners who can adapt to meet the changing demands of the world in which they are growing up.

A good practical example of how student agency is being enacted in schools is the work being done in South Australia by the SACE Board (n.d.a, n.d.b). Over the past three years, under the banner of the “We are more” campaign, the SACE Board has been running a series of pilots to look at new ways “to recognise a broader and deeper range of young people’s skills and capabilities” (SACE Board, n.d.a). The “Activating Identities for the Future” (AIF) pilot has been carried out with Year 11 students in South Australian schools. According to the SACE Board (n.d.b),

... AIF students take greater ownership and agency over their learning ‘learning how to learn’ as they select relevant strategies ‘knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do’ to explore, create and/or plan to progress an area of personal interest.

Cultivating a learning culture for all

Developing student agency requires teachers to change their practice, creating more space for students to step in and take ownership of their individual and collective learning process. As Goode et al. (2003) state, “nothing really changes for students and their learning unless there are changes in beliefs, behaviours, and practices of teachers” (p. 7). Our experience suggests that this is one of the reasons schools are struggling to embed the 21st century skills in everyday learning and teaching practices. Changing beliefs and assumptions is by its nature an adaptive challenge in that it requires us to learn something new. The challenge is that learning is conspicuous by its absence in most organisations today (Conigrave, 2022). To test this proposition in your school, ask the following three questions:

1. How often do you and others ask open-ended questions in team meetings?
2. How safe is it to experiment and fail when working with colleagues in your school?
3. How is learning designed, incentivised and rewarded in the daily life of teachers and leaders in your school?

The challenge for all of us is that learning requires “the identification and correction of errors” and this can be “potentially embarrassing or threatening” (Argyris, 2002, p. 206).

This is made more challenging when we consider that creating the conditions that enable student agency in schools requires a shift in power where students are repositioned as active partners in educational practice, not just passive recipients. This shift can be experienced as a loss of power by teachers, moving away from the old role that they know and understand (Robertson, 2017). This move is often expressed in the aphorism “from sage on the stage to guide on the side” (King, n.d.). To support teachers in making this shift in power, leaders across the school need to model the same in their leadership, de-emphasising their role in prescribing, controlling, or judging and focusing more on learning, coaching, and collaborating. It is the role of school leaders to cultivate the conditions in the school where teachers feel enabled to step into their authority to lead the learning in their classroom in a way that creates space for students to express their own agency. Teachers express their agency through their “capacity and power to make choices, as opposed to simply having a say” (Robertson, 2017, p. 44) about how the teaching and learning unfolds in their classrooms.

The school leadership required to cultivate the conditions that enable agency in students and teachers does not reside only in the most senior leader in the school; leaders at all levels within the school have this role:

As a leader, it is your job to develop strategies for yourself and your teams that will enable learning to happen at all levels, on the job, alongside the delivery of outcomes. (Conigrave 2022, p. 6)

The role of leadership teams

A key structure that supports and enables a learning culture in schools is the leadership team. Leadership teams include the Senior Leadership Team (School Principal and their team) middle school and junior school teams, teaching teams and department teams among others. The research into high performing teams by Hackman and Wageman (2008) articulates three dimensions of performance that make teams effective:

1. They meet or exceed the expectations of their stakeholders;
2. They enhance team members capability to work together – “they become adept at detecting and correcting errors before serious damage is done, and at noticing and exploiting emerging opportunities” (Hackman & Wageman, 2008, p.5); and
3. The team contributes positively to the learning and personal wellbeing of individual members.

The stakeholders in schools are many and varied, often with competing agendas. This makes the work of understanding their expectations and articulating them in a way that creates alignment a complex task. This complexity requires leadership teams to learn their way forward and hence the second and third dimensions of a high performing team focus on team and individual learning.

There is a fallacy in the field of leadership development that Hackman refers to as the *Leaders Attribution Error* (Hackman, 2002). This is a tendency in all of us to attribute the success or failure of the team to the behaviours of the leader independent of the context or environment the team is working in. Yet, a 10 year research project led by Hackman and Wageman published in 2008 found that instead of focusing solely on behaviours of the team leader and team members, leaders should do the cognitive pre-work of designing six conditions that create an environment where strategic, aligned, collaborative decision making can happen. The six conditions are:

1. *A real team* – is bounded (people know who is on the team) and stable (it has been together long enough to build relationships) with an interdependent task (team members feel jointly accountable for the outcome)
2. *A compelling purpose* – the interdependent task is compelling (team members buy into it), consequential (it really matters) and clear (team members can see what it looks like)
3. *Right people* – team members have the diversity of skill and perspective required to deliver on the interdependent task. They demonstrate the right behaviours required for success.
4. *Sound structure* – the team is the right size in terms of numbers (the sweet spot being between six to eight people) and has norms of behaviour relative to the compelling purpose.
5. *Supportive context* – the team has the right information and materials to do the job. Rewards and incentives are aligned to the purpose of the team.
6. *Team coaching* – the team attends to process and develops individual and team capability building (Hackman & Wageman, 2008).

Where to start? It always starts with the work

Part of the role of leaders of teams in schools is to put in place the conditions for the team to effectively deliver upon the expectations of various stakeholders. To do the deeper learning work required to address the more complex, adaptive challenges that schools face (such as embedding 21st century skills in the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment), the team needs a clearly articulated interdependent task that they own together (Hackman & Wageman 2008).

The interdependent task should reflect the vision and strategy for the school, focused on resolving the tension inherent in perceived polarities such as equity and excellence, learning and wellbeing, accountability and care. When teams are collaborating on this deeper, learning work, they need the capacity and time to step into the space of not knowing, thus feeling safe to be vulnerable with their colleagues (Conigrave, 2022). Leaders can begin reimagining what their team could be, focused around the two or three big challenges, that if addressed would make the biggest difference to the learning and wellbeing of their students.

A compelling purpose as a guiding light

Clarifying the interdependent task of the team into a compelling purpose provides a key scaffold to bind the team and guide the agenda. A compelling purpose for a team is clear as team members have a shared sense of what success looks like and also challenging as there is stretch and learning embedded in the task (Conigrave, 2022, p. 14). To craft a compelling purpose is not a simple task. It captures the unique value-add of the team; the work that only this team can do. Experience suggests that this work is best done with a small group of confidants that the school principal can test ideas with before getting the team to work on the draft statement and make it their own. When done well, a compelling purpose will help to create the conditions for superb collaboration, giving the team members a reason to overcome their individual competence compulsion (Bushe, 2010) and learn from and with their colleagues.

A good scaffold for a compelling purpose statement is:

1. This team exists to..... (capturing the two or three big challenges that would make the biggest difference)
2. By..... (a series of four or five bullet point activities that the team will do to address these challenges)
3. So that (the outcome if the big challenges are addressed).

The rights skills and behaviours

Once the leader has the clear structure in place to guide the team (interdependent task and compelling purpose), it is time to ensure they have the right skills and behaviours embodied by team members to effectively deliver on the purpose. Leaders often assume that they don't have the capacity to change team members and so even asking "do I have the right skills and behaviours?" feels like a bridge too far. Before starting to wish for different team members, leaders can think about the team they do have and where the hidden skills and talents are. Perhaps they are latent within the team members and have been waiting for the right conditions to show themselves? The question to ask is, "How could you develop the capability of the team members to demonstrate the skills and behaviours required to deliver on the compelling purpose?" It is a leader's role to create the conditions in the team where people can do their best work and truly flourish. Once the leader has the compelling purpose in place they can clearly assess where the team is at relative to the requirements of the task.

"A key structure that supports and enables a learning culture in schools is the leadership team."

Putting it into practice

Putting in place the six conditions for superb collaboration takes time and practice. This is an expression of leadership as learning activity (Conigrave, 2022). One of the keys to success is developing a "sound structure" which looks to develop the key practices or team norms that support the team to deliver on its purpose. Collaboration is not like a warm bath. It requires team members to take the risk of learning something new, out in the open with their colleagues. Agreeing with the team, the three or four practices that will support the collaboration is a critical step. These practices are not waffle; they are actions that team members agree will make the team work more effective. The leader and team members who support one another are improving their performance through reflective practice and constructive feedback.

Managing a supportive context

Collaborative decision making requires that team members have the right information in front of them and a context that is free from distractions and enables good dialogue. As the team leader, the question needs to be asked as to whether there is relevant data to show progress on agreed tasks? Often this will require feedback from key stakeholders through tools such as school and parent surveys, notes from key meetings and good financial information and other qualitative/quantitative data relevant to the task. Data walls are common in schools and a similar approach can be adapted to visualise the work and progress of the team.

Another key aspect of a supportive context is ensuring that rewards and incentives are aligned to the purpose of the team. In our experience, rewards and incentives in a school setting usually focus on non-financial rewards such as constructive/positive and timely developmental feedback and stretch assignments aligned to individual intrinsic motivation.

Getting better at getting better

Once a leader has the first five conditions in place, they need to focus on continuous improvement, ensuring that there is a focus on the team process as well as the outputs and outcomes in order for the team to evolve and adapt to the ever-changing context. While this is a key role of the team leader, team members can also act as "coaches" to the team, taking turns to focus on process and providing feedback against the norms of practices mentioned above. This reflective practice can also be used to support individual team members in their on-going professional development as leaders in the school.

Conclusion

School leaders are accountable for creating the conditions in their school where all students, teachers and leaders can learn and thrive in today's rapidly changing context. This is complex adaptive work and is best delivered through well designed teams that demonstrate superb collaboration. The science of the six team conditions provides a process for designing, launching, and coaching high performing teams required for this task.

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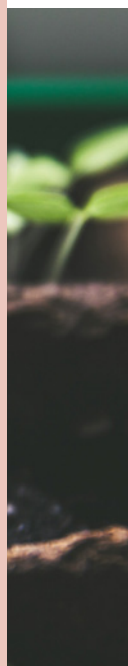
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