



Six Elements for Successful Collaboration

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One of the many wonderful opportunities I have as a principal, is being able to collaborate with the teachers and staff members in my building. Collaboration has assisted me in creating a healthy school environment, meeting the needs of students and serving families. Collaboration is the ultimate key to success in schools for increasing student achievement, creating a culture of excellence, improving instructional practices, and removing barriers that impede on closing the achievement gap. When collaboration is not occurring in schools, teachers, leaders, and staff members are forced to work in isolation and are left to their own devices when serving students. In the absence of collaboration, educators can experience burnout at a more rapid pace and become easily frustrated with everyday challenges.

Collaboration is not a new concept in the professional setting. Medical doctors collaborate about patients and what's in their best interest. It is not unfamiliar for law enforcement agencies to work together in solving criminal cases or searching for those who have committed crimes. Lawyers often work together to win cases, and construction workers come together to build homes and communities. It is also not uncommon to see successful professional sports team who are not the most talented as individuals but work together to win championships. Educators should not be any different in their efforts to collaborate to achieve a common purpose and do what is best for students. When a team of educators are working together for the betterment of students, they will always achieve more than individuals who work alone. In my professional experiences, I have found six elements to be essential for successful collaboration:



1. GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE GROUP

It's important to get the right people involved in your efforts to collaborate. This entails working with individuals who have an interest in working together to solve a problem, develop an idea, or maximize an opportunity that benefits students. Whatever the 40 principal navigator purpose, getting the right people in the room to work toward a common goal makes all of the difference and will save a lot of energy. It is imperative that you know your team and understand their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and willingness to collaborate. We all have something that we can contribute to a team in order to build successful schools and increase student learning, but not every person may be rightfully invested in all areas.

2. HAVE A COMMON PURPOSE

You need to have a common purpose for the collaboration. Share the purpose of the collaboration with the group prior to the meeting. If not, you will squander valuable time, and what should be a productive conversation may turn into a bickering session, gossiping, or unfocused conversation. Be sure to keep the intended goal front and center while writing it in a place where everyone can see. Designate a person to be responsible for keeping the group on task and the conversation focused. I cannot stress the importance of clearly communicating the collaboration topics and goals. You should provide as much detailed information as possible in order for the collaborations to be laser-focused and to remove any assumptions.

3. LISTEN ACTIVELY

Listen to the input from the individuals in the groups, and make sure that you are physically AND mentally present. If you have to assign seats to prevent side conversations between participants who can distract one another, then do so. If you are anything like me and find it challenging to take detailed notes and listen at the same time, then ask someone to take notes for the group. That way you can listen actively and ask engaging questions. Remove outside distractions if possible. This includes sharing with others outside of the group that the meeting is not to be interrupted unless it is something of extreme importance. You may want to consider hosting the meeting in a location that does not have a high traffic volume with people coming in and out of the meeting and serving as a distraction.

4. RESPECT AND VALUE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Respect the viewpoints of everyone in the group. There is a reason that you chose these individuals to come together for the purpose of collaborating. Although their opinions and perspectives may be different than yours, it does not mean that there isn't any value in what they offer to the group. One of the reasons collaboration is so powerful is the fact that you can get multiple people together to focus on the same topic, and they will each offer different perspectives based on their thoughts, knowledge, and experiences. You can have an idea that isn't completely right, but still has good points to it. Just the same, you can have ideas that appear to be ineffective; however, through collaboration, you can build from certain components of the ideas and make them beneficial to the purpose of the group.

5. LEAVE WITH A PLAN

Have a plan in place for when the collaboration is completed— even if the plan is to collaborate again because the group needs more time. It is normal for everything to not get resolved in one meeting, so do not hesitate to set future meeting dates to give the group additional time. If there is a list of items that needs to be completed, ensure that everyone knows their responsibilities and what needs to be done. Collaboration is similar to building a home. Once the plans have been discussed and laid out, the work still needs to be done and is never completed in one day. You may very well need on-going collaboration to complete the job.

6. REFLECT ON THE COLLABORATION

It is important to reflect on the collaboration. This can be done alone or as a group. Taking notes will be important for this purpose. Most of the time people cannot recall the entire conversation during the collaboration, and this is when you want to refer to the notes that were taken. For good reflection, you should refer back to the notes from the discussion and review key points that were made. Allow people time to think so they can either expand on previous thoughts or potentially reconsider their point of views or ideas. This also allows you to reevaluate the efforts of the group and its effectiveness. The team will also be given additional opportunities to reflect and consider the strengths and weaknesses of the collaboration to determine if any changes need to be made for the next meeting.

As I reflect over my years as a principal and consider my successes and failures, I am confident that many of the successes stem from collaboration with teachers

and staff members. Having the opportunity to listen to ideas, hear solutions, and receive feedback on initiatives has been of great service to students and families. I firmly believe that individuals accomplish little by themselves, but a collaborative team of individuals who are working together can accomplish the impossible. Successful collaboration requires being driven by a common purpose, hard work, rigorous focus, and respect of different viewpoints. Each collaboration opportunity is unique, and so is the reason behind the efforts to work together. However, with the six elements for essential collaboration, any team that is working together for a common purpose of serving students can be successful.