

COLLABORATION BACK TO THE BASICS

THE JOURNEY BETWEEN THE HEAD & THE HEART by Rosa Fazio



Over time I am discovering how much our own experience in life and in school affects how we handle situations and how we teach. We bring a strong belief about schooling to our classrooms every day and in every way.

One of the first questions I asked Randall Fielding of Fielding Nair International is why he decided to immerse himself in school design and create amazing new innovative learning spaces. The answer was simple, yet daring – he ran away from school in Kindergarten because it was nothing like the comfort of his home, which eventually led him to deinstitutionalize schools and make them more inviting and caring spaces.

Norma Rose Point School in Vancouver is a Fielding Nair design produced by local architects *thinkspace*. The learning spaces or pods are comfortable, welcoming, and inviting. They are designed for up to four teachers to collaborate, and to share a professional office and learning community of 66 – 120 students. The teachers co-plan and co-teach. We often refer to it as “working in community” as teachers do not escape to isolation. It can be an absolutely magical environment and learning situation. However, it can also create challenging situations and discomfort for educators. That’s not surprising as educators have diverse ideas and personal “movies of the mind” as to how a student’s educational experience should look.



What would you do if you were expected to work as part of a team the majority of the time?

How would that look for you?

Clay Shirky describes three levels of collaboration referenced as the *Shirky Ladder*: sharing, cooperation, and collective action. Although he frames his model in the context of the Internet and social media and how they enable forms of collaboration outside of traditional norms, it also has relevance on collaborative efforts within schools. These levels exist on a ladder of increasing commitment, risk, and reward. The rungs represent how much the individual

has to work to coordinate actions with the group. *Sharing* is the easiest of the three. You offer something of use to others who can do as they wish with the item or content. *Cooperating* is the second, harder level because it means “changing your behaviour to synchronize with others who are changing their behaviour to synchronize with yours.” (Shirky, 2008) Cooperating involves shared risk and reward – conversational skills are important as well as adhering to mutually agreed upon standards while remaining flexible. *Collective action*, the third and rarest level of collaboration, is when a group of people dedicate themselves to an all-in shared effort. It’s a game changer and creates interest and demand from others regarding the collective efforts. It is the hardest to get going and to sustain, and involves shared risk, reward, and accountability.

At Norma Rose Point School, we are immersed in collective action. We are not working in silos. We are organized in pods and are accountable to all students. Our collective efforts in flexible learning spaces with creative and innovative professionals in a school is being recognized by others worldwide. However, I’ve been struggling for the past two years to find out how I, as a school leader, can engage staff in addressing the messiness of collaboration and in establishing practices for success. I am left with more questions than answers:

- Why is it so hard to work together?
- What have teachers learned so far about their collaborative efforts?
- What has worked well?
- What are the advantages and unique possibilities?
- How do we decrease the stress

within communities?

- What is causing the stress?
- What creates an effective team?

To be clear, the tension that exists at Norma Rose Point is about group dynamics. As much as tension exists, so too does the commitment towards collective action.

In general, there is a common understanding that a collaborative group of educators has a potential that doesn’t exist when they are in isolation. Groups can transform educational practice by building on everyone’s strengths to improve learner outcomes. In an article by Steve Munby and Michael Fullan (2016), *Inside-out and downside-up: how leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems*, the authors write of “cluster-based school collaboration” as an avenue for system-wide school improvement, in essence what Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser have been advocating for decades in establishing Networks of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII) in British Columbia. Fullan and Munby (2016) note the success factors for effective system-wide school collaboration:

1. Above all, the purpose of collaboration must be to improve outcomes.
2. Every partnership must be founded on an articulated shared moral purpose.
3. Transparency, trust, and honesty are crucial and a professional obligation.
4. A commitment *to* and capacity *for* effective peer review form the engine that drives improvement under these conditions. (p. 5)

An article in the *New York Times*, *What Google Learned in its Quest to Build the Perfect Team* states that it’s not about the WHO but it’s about establishing group norms and lis-

tening with heart. Successful teams share insecurities, fears, and aspirations and create psychological safety. A beginning point, then, is to spend the time to learn what each team member is about and to share vulnerability.

Steven Covey (1989) has long spoken about one’s emotional bank account – a metaphor for safety and trust that we have with other human beings. We need to make deposits into this account so it builds up a reserve, otherwise the emotional bank account goes into withdrawal where safety is threatened and tensions are high. When we are showing discourtesy, cutting people off, overreacting, or adopting a particular tone, then people begin to feel like they are walking on egg shells. People become careful with what they say, silence results, and people enter either the flight or fight mode. We need to consciously make deposits to create more trust – enough trust to make withdrawals without going into overdraft.

How do we navigate this?

How do we navigate through the difficult times?

Patrick Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* writes that teams are inherently dysfunctional since they are made up of imperfect individuals who have egos and selfish goals. He writes about making teamwork a top priority and why trust is the basis of all teamwork. Building trust within the team allows members to share vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and mistakes openly and become comfortable engaging each other in conflict. A revealing comment is that teams perform poorly in the absence of teamwork because they waste time and energy on politics – trying to outmaneuver each other. This results in low morale,

less focus on performance, and the loss of valuable players who have had enough.

We need to go back to establishing our group norms and our moral purpose before moving any further. Although collective action is exhilarating, it presents many challenges within an educational setting such as ours. In two years, what have we learned as part of our lived experience at Norma Rose Point? Here are the basics of what we need to continually work on.

Be willing to let go of assumptions, traditions, and beliefs unless they are grounded in research. Our ways need to be evidence-based not solely feelings-based. No one can say that they know everything, nor have a 100% success rate. It's unreasonable to believe that your way is the only way.

Listen as much as you speak while modeling respect. Being respectful means recognizing that something may not be *your* perfect way, it's *our* way based on everyone believing they have been heard and are valued. It may not be my right and true way, but we will get there, incrementally. It is not necessarily going to look like your previous school, nor like the "movie in your mind." Rather, it will reflect every member of the team.

Everyone. Represented. Valued.

People want to feel trusted. They want to be told that they and their ideas are valued. Without having built trust, instead of thinking of major changes, why not consider incremental changes? Minor edits over time create trust and the impetus for change. This will allow for sustainable working groups instead of fleeing working groups.

Give it time. A brand new group of people coming together to build a team is like entering Kindergarten. The following year of working together is like entering Grade 1 and so forth. We need time to build on our skills and to grow as learners. Even adults.

Establish group norms. Be specific about what each team has agreed to – from which days they will be staying late to when no more changes can be made to a day's plan. The group expectations need to be explicitly stated to ensure a common understanding. Set ground rules and play *within* those rules.

Do not compare. How do we find the fine point that allows us to change things while not diminishing someone else's worth? There's a fine line and it's challenging to know where the tipping point rests with every individual. Different teams will look different. One is no less, nor better, than the other. Modeling care is foundational. Judging others gets us nowhere. In fact, it gets others on the highway away from the team. Remember, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it that matters." Focus on your group and your strengths. Avoid comparisons.

Communicate and assume you are being filmed. Every group recognizes the individual that has a harder time accepting compromise if they don't get their way so others back off. Other group members become silenced because of what others say or how they behave. Be careful not to show anger and to refrain from being judgemental. The dissatisfied feel put down, inadequate, afraid to speak, and not

acknowledged for their strengths. Those getting their way, feel even more frustrated things aren't moving along as fast as they want them to move along. Everyone believes they are compromising their ways.

Never abandon your team in haste, in anger, or in frustration. Talk about what you are experiencing on a weekly basis by reflecting on collaboration using this protocol, adapted from Navigators Council:

- What brought you joy this week?
- What was something that was hard this week?
- What is one specific thing I can do for you this coming week?
- Is there anything that has gone unsaid: convictions, confessions, unresolved hurt?
- What's a dream or thought that's been on the forefront of your mind this week?

I am told by two of our communities that the questions above allowed them to move beyond the superficial and enter a place where they needed to get to. The questions above reflect on connections of the heart.

Lara-Lisa Condello, in *Arresting Hope* (2014) offers an insight shared by a medicine man, "*The longest journey I will travel is the twelve inches between my head and heart.*" (p.187) May our continued efforts recognize this undeniable journey between the head and the heart. At the same time, may trust ensue so that we may take on the necessary challenges within our innovative learning environment because "*with trust, conflict is nothing but the pursuit of truth.*" (Lencione, Youtube). 

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References for this article can be found online at <http://bit.ly/1Vp7gzp>