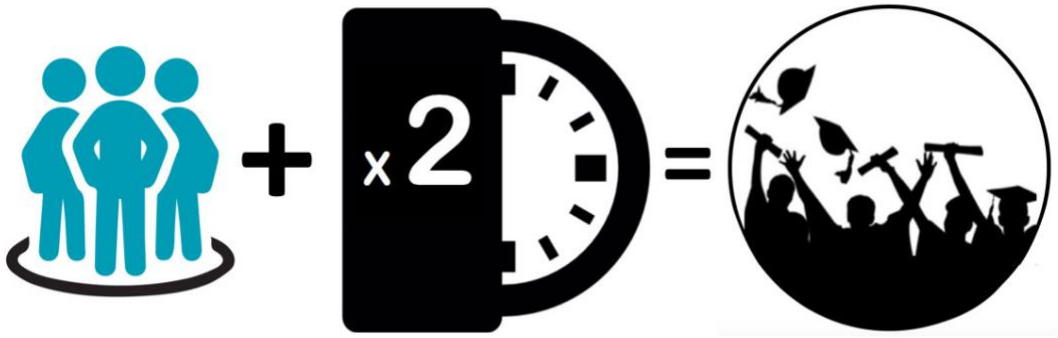


Teams That Maximise Collective Teacher Efficacy

Rethinking Teaching Teams & School Improvement Groups: Maximising Collective Teacher Efficacy

"No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship." James Comer

"Accomplishing the maximum impact on student learning depends on teams of teachers working together." John Hattie

Whilst the phrase 'teachers as lifelong learners' is the new mantra driving 21st century schools I'm increasingly concerned we are putting the cart before the horse in how we go about achieving this. I am concerned that we may be *doing the right work but in the wrong way*, inadvertently prioritising the development of a teacher's professional learning ahead of the development of teacher's working relationships. If it is true that *no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship* than we must first build significant working relationships among teams of teachers before we can expect significant learning to occur.

In many schools there is constant time pressure to get more done in less time. Team meetings for teachers to share professional challenges and support each other are often either hijacked by mandatory training or scheduled too infrequently to provide any continuity of meaningful relationships and teamwork. Thus, many teaching teams are '*team by name but not by nature*' leaving staff frustrated and under supported.

The 3 key ingredients for a *'team by nature'* are: (1) sharing a common purpose & accountability; (2) using team specific strategies to progress their growth & goals; and (3) having adequate time and frequency of meetings.

What Are Teaching Teams?

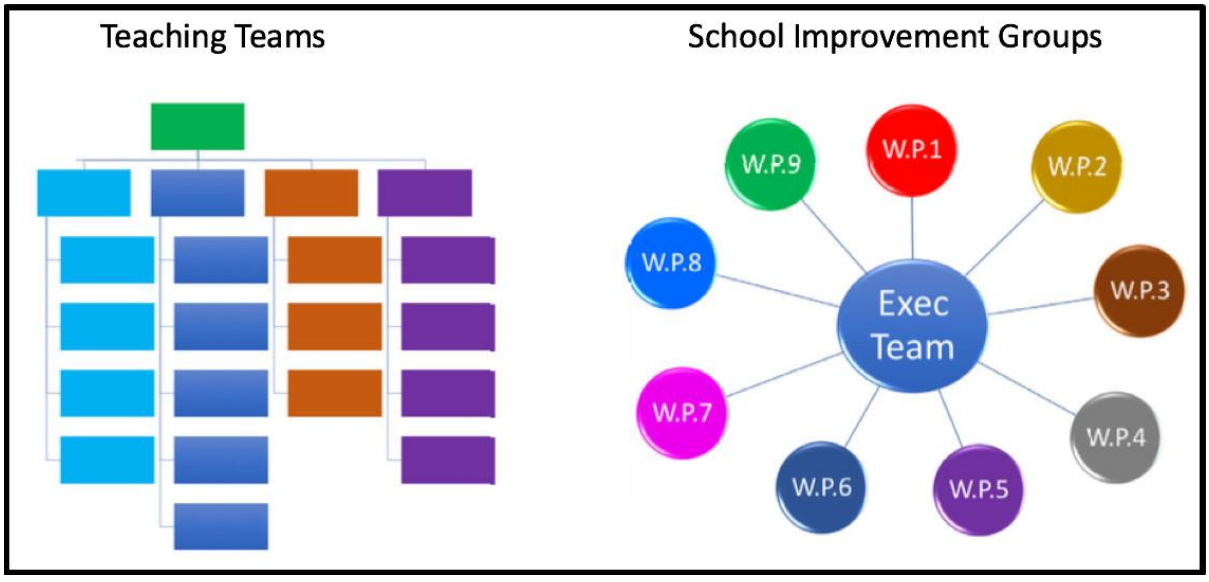
Teaching teams are groups of 5-7 teachers* (*can be larger or smaller by using adapted strategies) who work with the same cohort/s of students. However, the term 'teaching team' itself is referred to by a number of different names often causing further confusion. There are several variations around the names used in education derived from different researchers and experts. Dufour & Fullan use the term 'Professional Learning Communities / Teams (PLCs/ PLTs).' Costa & Kallick describe such groups as 'Critical Friends Groups' and other researchers such as Etienne Wenger use the term 'Communities of Practice.' In Japan, Turner states that teaching teams are called Lesson Study or Lesson Research Groups. Across Australia we hear the most frequent terms used as Teaching Teams, Cohort Teams or PLCs / PLTs.

When it comes to understanding why many schools are struggling with the team by name but not by nature problems, there are three big problems that I have seen over the years which, with the right alternative strategy in place, can all be easily overcome.

1. Problems With Purpose & Accountability

Confusing Governance and Management in Achieving School Improvement Goals

School wide improvement is an important and necessary part of running a High Performance School yet there are ongoing mistakes made in the implementation of school improvement strategies related to designating these to either teaching teams of improvement groups (AKA working parties). The diagram below is a simplified organisational chart showing the line management of teams (i.e., teaching teams) versus the governance of working parties (i.e., school improvement groups).



Selecting the right vehicle to drive a particular improvement agenda is fairly straight forward as long as the accountability for the improvement is clear. For improvements

in teaching and learning such as writing, reading, numeracy etc. the accountability will rest on the homogenous (i.e., cohort) teams of teachers and thus teaching teams are the natural owners of such initiatives. However, far too often, specialised improvement groups with heterogenous (i.e., mixed) teams of teachers from across the school are formed to tackle teaching and learning topics which leads to diffusion of responsibility and inconsistent practice (the opposite of the desired benefits of such groups).

For school improvements focused on 'community participation' or other cultural initiatives there is a wider accountability beyond cohort teams. For these types of improvement strategies specialised improvement groups with mixed memberships from across the school are ideal. Whilst it is less common, the unhelpful practice of assigning these accountabilities to a specific cohort teams (who are then overloaded with school wide responsibilities as well as their cohort specific core teaching and learning) is something to watch out for.

Have you got the accountability for your school improvement topics correctly assigned to either teaching teams or improvement groups?

Managing Up or Worried About Cliques? Pro Tip

Sometimes school leaders are concerned about the lack of obvious visibility of school improvement strategies if improvement groups are not being used. The question we have heard is: '*How can I demonstrate to my superiors that I have a schoolwide improvement agenda if I have very few, if any, schoolwide improvement groups?'* Easy – your teaching team meeting agendas and dashboards (see below) will explicitly show the connections throughout the school on key schoolwide initiatives whilst reinforcing appropriate accountability in the correct areas.

The other worry school leaders may have in this situation is *'How can I make sure my staff are not becoming cliques and silos within their cohorts if they spend most of their time in teaching teams?'* Again – Easy! They still intermingle in general staff meetings, get to know each other via a schoolwide structured buddy system and professional development activities, and would regularly work with other cohorts on planning days regarding student transitions between year levels. They may also be part of formal or informal whole school staff social activities.

2. Problems with the Choice of Strategies to Progress Growth & Goals

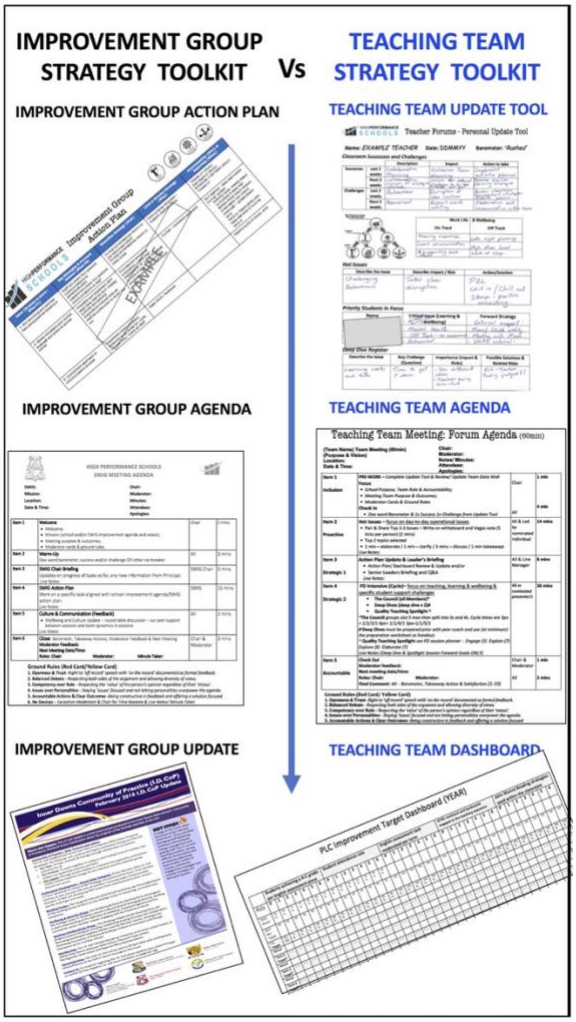
Placing a Teaching and Learning Agenda into an Improvement Group of Mixed Membership

A natural flow on from Problem 1 is that improvement groups, with wrongly assigned areas of accountability, move into a learning and development cycle with inadequate time to meet and build relationships. Given the lack of day-to-day accountability and limited contact time between the mixed members of improvement groups compared to the homogenous membership of teaching teams, the strength of relationships is sub-optimal for maximising growth and learning. It comes as no surprise that the quality of the inputs and outputs from these improvement meetings may be less than ideal.

As you can see in the table below, when you are trying to improve collective teacher efficacy, the team environment provides better consistency of focus and relationships than the improvement group environment.

Building Collective Teacher Efficacy: Teams vs Improvement Groups

Teaching Team (Cohort Group)	Improvement Groups (Mixed Group)
Data Accountability At Group Level	Data Accountability Not At Group Level
Working on same curriculum level	Working on different curriculum levels
Working with same age / development group	Working with different age / development groups
Working on similar classroom and behaviour dynamics	Working on different classroom and behaviour dynamics
Working with peers with higher day-to-day contact	Working with peers with lower day-to-day contact



The solution to the problem of aligning the right strategy to maximise the growth and goals of either teaching teams or improvement groups is to either (a) use an improvement group agenda, action plan and update strategy for cultural improvement initiatives or (b) use a teaching and learning agenda, update tool and dashboard in teaching team meetings (see below). [(Click here to download our free teaching team meeting kit).]

3. Problems with Adequacy (ie., Time and Frequency) of Teaching Team Meetings

Scheduling Improvement Group Meetings During Time that could be Spent Developing Teaching Teams

The timetabling of improvement groups (if/ when they are actually needed) should be outside the normal meeting cycles of schools with the absolute priority to maximise the amount of meeting time teaching teams can achieve (ideally 1 hour per week [see Elise Keith's excellent article on meeting cycles for different types of teams]). Take a look at the Table below to see the impact of scheduling improvement groups into the normal meeting cycle of a typical school. Over a term you can see teaching teams only get 3 hours of meeting time compared to a HPTschools where teaching teams get double that time 6 hours!

Example School Term Meeting Cycle – Normal vs High Performance*

Weeks	60 min Mtg Cycle (Normal)	60 Mtg Cycle (High Performance)*
1	General Staff	General Staff
2	Teaching Team	Teaching Team
3	Improvement Group	Teaching Team
4	General Staff	General Staff
5	Teaching Team	Teaching Team
6	Improvement Group	Teaching Team
7	General Staff	General Staff
8	Teaching Team	Teaching Team
10	Improvement Group	Teaching Team
	Team Time Per Term = 3 Hrs	Team Time Per Term = 6 Hrs

*Where timetabling permits weekly 60 minute teaching team meetings is optimal but current time restricted schools still achieve at least 6 hours per term within available resources.

Bringing It Together

Teaching Team Relationships Matter: Double The Time, Double The Focus, Double The Benefits!

Teachers do need to be lifelong learners but the challenge for school leaders is to do the right work (i.e., focus on teacher learning and growth) in the right way (i.e., develop the conditions needed to be teams in nature not just in name). Remember the two important quotes from the start of this article from James Comer, '*No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship'* and John Hattie, *'Accomplishing the maximum impact on student learning depends on teams of teachers working together .'*As a school leader you can follow the three steps below to massively increase collective teacher efficacy through the quality of teamwork and learning among teams of teachers, reduce the amount of meetings occurring in a busy and

time poor school environment, and increase the focus on both school improvement and teacher wellbeing!

Step 1: Effectively organise your school improvement priorities into either teaching and learning initiatives or cultural and community initiatives.

Step 2a: Assign cultural and community initiatives to improvement groups that develop a detailed action plan and meet for shorter periods in less frequent cycles according to the needs of the action plan outside of the normal school meeting cycle.

Step 2b: Assign the teaching and learning initiatives to teaching teams (aka PLCs, PLTs, Cohorts, etc.) and use the HPT Teaching Team update tools, agendas and dashboards to ensure progress on both relationship growth and teaching and learning goals at the team level across every team and in turn across the whole school.

Step 3: Schedule teaching team meetings weekly if possible or at least 2-3 times per month in consecutive blocks to maximise continuity of relationships, accountability and goal progression. Schedule improvement groups to meet according to the needs of the action plan outside of the normal school meeting cycles.

Want to know more? Check out Principal Kurt Goodwin's presentation at the 2019 QASSP Roundtable on Building High Performance Teaching Teams (click here); Read some of our other teaching team articles on LinkedIn; or get in touch with us about joining the High Performance Schools Program!

Dr Pete Stebbins PhD