



CHAPTER 1

Refining a Vision

Humanities Team, 2008

We meet because all departments meet on Wednesday afternoons. We meet because our school has bad test scores and we're supposed to do something about that. We meet because—I have no idea, actually, why this team is supposed to meet. The department chair communicates information from the district—testing schedules, textbook changes, new initiatives. Then there's me, the coach, and I'm supposed to do what? When I came onboard, I asked the principal, "What do you hope I'll do with this department?" He said, "Get them to work better together." So we meet on Wednesdays.

To build something, we need to know what it is we want to build. I suspect that sometimes we struggle to build teams because we haven't even decided what we're trying to build or what describes this end goal. We need to start with articulating these elements of a vision before we start construction. The rest of this book offers

you tools and strategies for team building, but in this first chapter we consider the what, why, and when of teams. First: a quick clarification of terminology.

A NOTE ON TERMS

For the sake of simplicity and flow, there are sets of terms I use interchangeably in this book. First, I use *team* and *group* to mean the same thing—a unit of people who convene to work together interdependently for a shared, meaningful purpose.

To describe the kind of team I aspire to create, the kind I believe has potential to serve our schools and children, I also use a set of adjectives interchangeably: *great*, *effective*, *high-performing*, *high-functioning*, and *successful*. I don't want to confuse you, nor do I want to bore you with repetitive terminology. So if you wonder, "Well, what does she mean now when she says a team is high functioning?" I mean the same thing as when I say a team is effective.

I also use the terms *leader* and *facilitator* interchangeably. There are some differences between how we are identified by others—whether we are appointed to lead or facilitate a team, whether those in our team see us as a leader or a facilitator. Leaders often have more positional or situational authority, which often grants them more decision-making rights. Facilitators are more likely to guide a process and to have either decision-making power equal to the rest of the team members or no decision-making powers at all. Even though it's important to distinguish your role (and I'll return to this in Chapter 2), I hope that this book will have a wide range of readers—from site administrators to department heads to centrally based coaches to superintendents. Therefore, I'll alternate between the terms *leader* and *facilitator* so you know that regardless of your role I'm thinking of you.

WHAT IS A GREAT TEAM?

When I reflect on the transformational coach team that I led, I often think, "That was a great team, an incredible team, an awesome team that rocked." For the sake of simplicity and transferability to other contexts ("rocked" might not translate in some places), I've settled on using *great* as the broadest and widest descriptor of the kinds of teams I aspire to create.

J. Richard Hackman's (2011) work assisted me in defining the following three dimensions of great teams. Exhibit 1.1 can help you to consider these as they relate to a team you are a part of now, or once were a part of. Here are the three dimensions of a great team.

Exhibit 1.1. Dimensions of a Great Team: A Tool for Reflection

Dimension	Indicators	Yes/No
Product Something of quality gets done that is valuable, useful, and appreciated.	Was our product well received?	
	Did our clients (students, teachers, parents, staff) think that our product was high quality?	
	Did what we do make a difference to our clients?	
	Do I feel proud of the work we did together?	
Process The group's collaboration skills increase as a result of working together.	Did our ways of working together improve over time?	
	Did our ability to communicate with each other, manage unproductive conflict, and have healthy conflict increase?	
	If I was to continue working with this team, do I feel confident that our work products would continue to improve because we've figured out how to best work together?	
	If the team has disbanded: If this team were to reconvene, would I want to rejoin it?	
Learning The team experience is a learning experience that increases the skills and knowledge of individual team members.	Did I learn in this team?	
	Did being a part of this team help me improve my skills in my primary area of practice (e.g., teaching, coaching, leading)?	
	Did I feel I could take risks in my learning in this team?	
	Did I trust the other people in this team most of the time?	
	Did I feel like I belonged to a community?	

1. Product: A great team gets something done that is valuable, useful, and appreciated.

For many teams in our context, our products might be hard to identify. However, this is a primary indicator of a great team: that we get something done. Furthermore, the opinions of the recipients of this product count, so we need to know what they think of the work we do and we need to meet their expectations.

An instructional leadership team (ILT), for example, may be responsible for building the instructional capacity of staff. The ILT's primary role is to design and deliver professional development and to lead department teams. In this case, the ILT's products would be PD sessions and department meetings. We can evaluate the value and usefulness of these products on feedback forms and surveys.

In some teams, it's harder to identify products, but it's still worth an attempt. A grade-level team might convene to address a range of business items, including logistical issues that arise in their band, specific students who are struggling, and curriculum. The product of their work together might be schedules, new agreements, or insights into instructional practices. Although these activities may be valuable, if a team needs to think about product it can push members to reflect on what they're doing together. We'll come back to this question of what we're doing together in Chapter 4.

The product for a team of coaches is the impact they have on the clients they serve. In the case of the transformational coach team, our primary clients were teachers and administrators, and we measured impact in many ways, including on anonymous surveys, through growth in teacher performance, and on feedback forms after professional development sessions. Given that during the two years we offered coaching support more than 95% of the feedback we received was positive and clients reported high levels of satisfaction, I conclude that our team did something valuable, useful, and appreciated.

2. Process: A great team's collaboration skills increase as a result of working together.

The end product is only one part of what makes a great team, and you can't be great if that's all you do because process counts. A great team strengthens its way of working together as a unit, which sets it up for future success. The way the group works together and the group dynamics (e.g., how members communicate, how they manage conflict) fosters its ability to work together interdependently in the future. A great team periodically reflects on how its members are working together and uses this reflection to improve its work. Great teams perform more capably when they have finished a chunk of work than when they began.

Let's consider the example of a high school art department that collaborates during the spring semester to put on its annual festival of the arts (the team's big product).


As the team navigates conflict—Whose art gets to go up in the main building? How do we divide our budget equitably when the visual arts teachers need more money for materials than the dance teacher?—it finds ways to bridge the challenges that arise. At the end of the semester, as group members reflect on the success of the festival and the record high attendance of students and parents, they compile a list of guidelines that they'll use in preparation for the event the following year. There is laughter as they reflect on the experience with comments like, "We'll never do that again" and "I had no idea you had those skills; I hope you'll do that again next year." Each member feels confident that next year's festival will be easier to prepare for and even better. This team's process results in a stronger ability to work together.

3. Learning: Members of a great team learn.

A team is great when its members learn things that they wouldn't have learned had they been alone. Their skills and knowledge about their primary area of practice increase as a result of being a member of this team. This means that teachers in an English department increase their skills and knowledge of teaching, curriculum, and pedagogy because of their participation in their department team. Coaches working together as a team improve coaching conversation skills as knowledge of working with adult learners increases. In an ILT, members learn about leadership. In a response to intervention team, members learn about individualized and systemic ways to support struggling learners. In a culture and climate team, members learn ways to lead for transformational change.

For learning to occur, members must feel safe with each other. It's important to extract this assumption to think about whether a team was truly great. Underneath a successful learning experience is that members trusted each other, built community with each other, and had overall positive feelings toward each other. This is the only way that members can explore perspectives that differ from their own.

Although feeling good is not an end goal in itself for a great team—and it's not one of the three dimensions of a great team—it is an essential condition for a team to truly engage in transformative learning. Learning, not emotional safety, is the goal, but we can't learn unless we feel safe.



*"The stars we are given.
The constellations we
create." Rebecca Solnit,
Storming
the Gates of Paradise*

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE TEAM?

Members of a great team know that they must work together in certain ways to produce results—to be effective. How a team functions is inseparable from its potential for success. Members of an effective team know, in the moment, whether a meeting will lead them down a path to results or whether their efforts will be detailed or stalled.

Harvard education professor Richard F. Elmore notes that virtually every school he's visited has had some kind of team structure in place and a regular schedule of meetings. However, Elmore explains that “... only about one in ten teacher teams that I observe functions at a level that would result in any improvement of instructional practice and student learning in the classroom” (quoted in Troen and Boles, 2012, p. xv). This is a startling observation, and it demands that we direct our attention to *how* we function in teams.

For a team to be effective, high performing, and successful (descriptors I use interchangeably), we need a concrete definition of what makes a team effective. Exhibit 1.2 could be used as a definition or as a springboard for a team to articulate its vision for the indicators of an effective team. Having such an articulated vision is essential. Appendix B contains the Team Effectiveness Self-Assessment, which can be used for team reflection. As with all self-assessment tools, the purpose is to have a guide for a discussion about how a team is working together so that reflection can be promoted, thus leading to improved performance.

Exhibit 1.2. Indicators of an Effective Team

1. **Purpose:** Team members understand and agree on the team's purpose and goals.
2. **Results:** The team accomplishes what it sets out to achieve.
3. **Meeting Process:** Meetings are well facilitated and focused and result in clear outcomes.
4. **Decisions:** There are clear and articulated agreements about how decisions will be made.
5. **Commitment:** Team members buy in to decisions without hidden reservations or hesitation; actions reflect their commitment.
6. **Contributions:** Member contributions (ideas or information) are recognized and utilized. Different styles are embraced.
7. **Creativity:** Team members experiment with different ways of doing things and are creative in their approach.

8. **Collaboration:** Team members share their experience and expertise in ways that enhance team productivity and development.
 9. **Respect:** Team members feel valued as an individual member. All members are treated with respect.
 10. **Interpersonal Communication:** Communication between members is open and balanced at meetings.
 11. **Productive Conflict:** Members engage in unfiltered debate around ideas and issues related to the work.
 12. **Unproductive Conflict:** Members work constructively on issues until they are resolved.
 13. **Procedures:** There are effective procedures to guide team functioning both during meetings and outside of meetings.
 14. **Accountability:** Team members hold each other accountable.
 15. **Evaluation:** The team regularly evaluates its process and productivity.
-

WHY DO WE NEED TEAMS?

At Learning Forward's 2013 annual conference, Professor Pedro Noguera delivered a keynote address on how to create equitable schools. He offered 10 equity practices that support the academic growth of all children and interrupt systemic inequities. After he concluded his prepared speech, the moderator asked, "What can people here do *now*? Tomorrow?" Dr. Noguera responded by urging us to find communities and to "build teams of people" who can take up this work. "We can't do it alone," he said.

This reminder is so simple yet so challenging: We can't do it alone. No individual alone can transform our schools into places where all children get what they need every day. Many of us are acutely aware of how much work needs to be done and of how far we are from an ideal of education. We might also be aware of our own individual limitations, including our capacity to do the amount of work that needs to be done and our individual scope of knowledge and skill set.

Teams have great potential for solving hard problems in challenging contexts. They bring together more skill, knowledge, and experience to work than any single individual can. They can integrate individual members' diverse contributions into a creative problem that is what is needed. Of course, as many of us know, teams can also go badly—not getting anything done or falling into groupthink. The challenge is to identify what it takes for teams to maximize their potential.

Some of us might suspect that we're stronger and more effective in teams, but we haven't had such an experience. Until we do, it can be hard to fully invest in building a team. We might be apprehensive about taking risks or trusting a leader. A leader needs to surface past experiences and beliefs about building teams to get buy-in to the process.

REFLECT: On the Need for Teams

1. Why do you think we need teams? What can we do in teams that we can't do alone?
2. What are the advantages of working in teams? What are the challenges?
3. Describe the most effective team you've ever been a part of or observed. What did this team do that wouldn't have been possible by a single individual?
4. What did you learn by working in a team that you might not have learned from working alone? What did you learn about yourself?
5. What's the hardest thing for you about facilitating a team?

WHEN DO WE REALLY NEED A TEAM?

In some organizations, there's a glorification of teams. A team is convened every other day, individuals belong to 17 different teams, and every task of every size is done collaboratively. However, sometimes what an organization needs is not a team but a working group or committee, and sometimes tasks might be better accomplished alone by one individual. The major distinctions between a team and a committee are listed in Exhibit 1.3.

Ideally, the classification of *team* is reserved for a limited number of groups. This number fluctuates based on the size of the school, the ability of the site leader to monitor teams, and the capacity of leaders and the organization as a whole. It is hard for an individual to lead more than three or four teams at the most—given that each team requires a work plan, regular monitoring, thoughtful agendas for each meeting, and so on. Leading teams takes a lot of time and energy. In addition, participants struggle if they belong to more than three or four teams at the most. To form strong teams, members need to develop trust between each other, effectively communicate with each

other, and efficiently get things done. The solution to all the work that needs to be done in schools isn't to create dozens of teams—it is to have a handful of really effective, high-functioning teams.

Exhibit 1.3. Do We Need a Team?

Convene a Team When ...	Convene a Committee or Working Group When ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The work to be done is adaptive. It requires learning and changing people's hearts and minds.• The reason for existence will be ongoing, long term, and instrumental to the ability of the organization to fulfill its mission.• The tasks the team will engage in require more resources than one person alone can provide.• The team's goals are directly in support of the larger organization's goals.• Membership will be consistent for at least a year and it's important that this team develop trust in each other.• Diverse skills and perspectives are required to accomplish the work.• There is someone with the skills to lead or facilitate the team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The work to be done is technical. It addresses a problem we know how to solve.• The work is episodic and organized around a specific task or project.• One person or a couple people can do what needs to be done.• There are tasks to complete, events to hold, and so on. The work done in this group may feed into or support the work of a team.• High levels of trust aren't essential to meet the group's goals and membership can fluctuate.• Divergent perspectives aren't essential. A limited skill set is needed.• The success of the group doesn't weigh heavily on a leader or facilitator with skills.

Working Alone

Don't be afraid of individuals working alone—either within or apart from a team. Many people (especially introverts) need quiet, independent work time to effectively contribute to the greater whole. Teams can work *interdependently* and *independently* at the same time. For example, if a team of coaches is charged with designing and

leading a 3-day summer training, some of the planning might be collaboratively decided, and much of the planning might be done in pairs or by individuals. The entire team may want to review plans after individuals have worked on them alone, but the actual planning of the work is sometimes best done individually. Every part of a team's work doesn't need to be done collaboratively, with everyone sitting around the table. A good indicator of team members trusting each other is that work can be divided up and people can go off and do parts of it alone or in pairs.

HOW DO WE BUILD TEAMS?

Although my intention in this book is to offer you strategies for building great teams, I can't dictate a sequence of steps that will ensure success. Furthermore, although I'll pay close attention to your role as a leader and what you can do, I also know that leaders cannot *make* a team great. You can put conditions in place to increase the likelihood that a team will be effective, but even your ability to put these conditions in place does not guarantee a successful team. Unfortunately, there is so much outside of our immediate control and influence that impacts a team's ability to thrive. That said, there's a whole lot you can do to build a great team. Let's get on with it.

Recommended Reading: *Seedfolks*

Sid Fleischman's *Seedfolks* is a novella about community building unlike any other I have read. It tells the story of how neighborhood residents transform a vacant, rat-infested, garbage-filled lot in Cleveland, Ohio, into a community garden. A different character narrates each chapter: a young Vietnamese girl who mourns her father, a Haitian immigrant, an elderly longtime resident, and many others whose poignant stories describe the pain and struggle of life. Together, these people transform the vacant lot; in turn, the garden transforms the community.

This is a story of grassroots organizing, of the power of sharing stories, and of our yearning to open our hearts to strangers. It depicts how abstract systems intersect and heap challenges on the individuals who exist within them. It is a story about transformational change.

When I taught middle school, I opened the year with this text as a suggestion of the community we could build together. It is a powerful read for young adults, and it also offers a blueprint for leaders who seek to build teams. If there's only one additional book you read related to team building or leadership, read *Seedfolks*—perhaps with your team. It may inspire you and offer you ideas for building a resilient community.

Transformational Coaching Team, 2014

“How has Michele influenced you?” I ask the eighth-grade English teacher about her coach, Michele. “She’s helping me be the teacher I always wanted to be,” she says. The teacher tells me that she’s developed a peer coaching structure in her class where students coach each other—not give each other answers but build each other’s capacity through supportive questioning. They’re preparing for Socratic seminars, using peer coaching to ensure that their rich conversations end up expressed in their written work. The teacher says, “I think about how Michele has coached me, the way she’s asked me questions and believed in me, and I’m teaching my kids to do that because it works.”

This teacher’s interactions with her students have changed dramatically over the period that she’s worked with Michele. She is much more patient, kinder, and gentler with her kids than when I observed her teaching years ago. She tells me how much she trusts Michele, and when I observe her class I see how her students trust her and trust each other. I see vertical communities emerging, radiating out from points throughout our system.

My vision for my coach team was that it would be a community of resistance—resisting obsession with test scores, hierarchical leadership, oppressive urgency, transactional schooling. My vision was that it would be a resilient community, a beloved community, a microcosm of the humanity that our schools need. I wonder if I’m seeing echoes, reflections of this vision in the teacher’s classroom, or whether her emerging vision aligns to mine, visions meeting in space and time.

