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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

Stop Micromanaging Teams

Principals in the most effective schools promote collaboration by embracing a concept described in the literature as directed autonomy. According to Richard DuFour, principals who promote a culture of directed autonomy “encourage teacher autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and parameters (tight).”

A culture of directed autonomy is at the core of highly effective, self-directed, collaborative teams but principals approach the task of promoting this idea in a variety of ways. Some embrace the belief that regularly attending team meetings is the best way to manage teams. Those who choose this approach do so based on the belief that close, constant supervision is the best way to monitor teams. Others realize there are practical limitations to their role and focus on building the capacity of teams. These principals believe that skillful teams are successful teams. Still others concentrate on monitoring the artifacts and products generated by teams during the natural course of collaboration.

“... Principals in schools with strong professional communities delegate authority, develop collaborative work decision-making processes, and step back from being the central problem solver. Instead they turn to the professional community for critical decisions.”
- Louis, Kruse & Marks

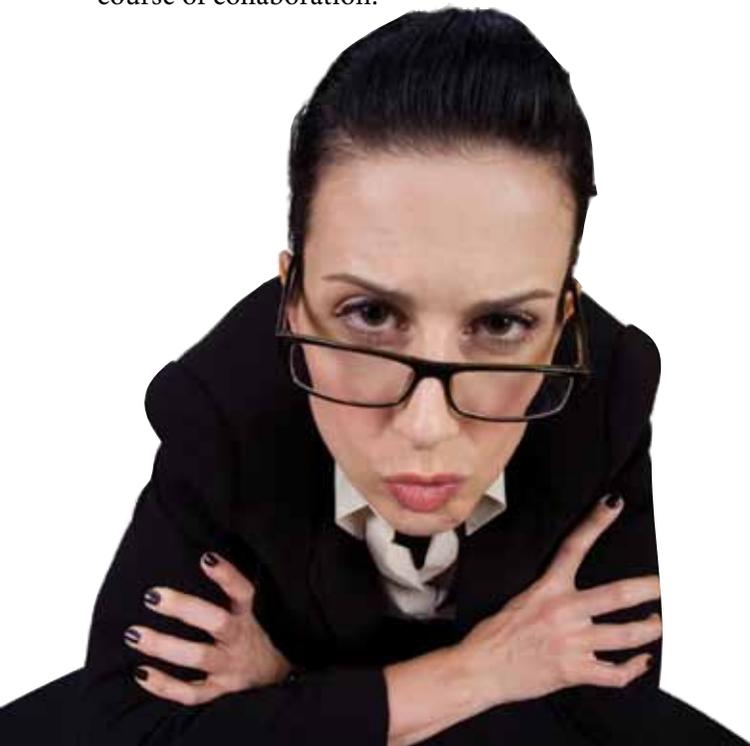
It may seem counter intuitive, but attending every team meeting is one of the least effective ways to promote a culture of directed autonomy. Rather than encouraging growth, this practice smothers teams and contributes to the illusion that because the principal is attending the meeting, teams are being monitored effectively. This is simply not the case. There are a number of reasons why routinely attending every team meeting is a poor choice for principals and leaders who opt for this strategy must understand that no matter how well intentioned, the constant presence of the principal at every team meeting will eventually cripple a culture of directed autonomy in their schools.

Reason #1: The tone and tenor of the team meeting is never the same.

Let's be honest. The moment a principal sits down, the tone and tenor of the meeting changes. It is no longer 'a team meeting' but 'a meeting between teachers and the principal'. Despite efforts to stay in the role of an impartial and interested observer, the team inevitably defers to the principal who, like it or not, becomes the 'defacto' leader of the meeting. Principals should not attend every team meeting unless they are willing to become team leader of every team in the building and at that point, why not simply hold a weekly faculty meeting?

Reason #2: The responsibility shifts from the team to the principal.

Having the principal present at every team meeting diminishes the responsibility teams feel for their decisions. Less responsibility generates less commitment and if decisions don't produce the intended results, the natural inclination is to shift responsibility for the lack of success. The con-



versation might go something like this; “It didn’t go well but the principal approved it, right? They were sitting right here when we made the decision, right? If it was a bad idea they should have stopped us before we wasted our time.”

Reason #3: No one can add meaningful input for every class, course or grade level.

Time and again teachers have reported that the best ideas about how to improve teaching and learning come from other teachers. Principals can and should support structures that allow teachers to meet and plan for student learning, but attending every team meeting does very little to contribute to that goal. It is illogical to expect someone who trained to become a high school mathematics teacher and spent their entire teaching career at the secondary level but now serves as an elementary principal to provide meaningful suggestions regarding teaching emergent readers at the kindergarten level.

Reason #4: It is the wrong response to the problem(s).

Principals who feel they must attend team meetings to ensure teachers will actually meet are really responding to resistors. What these leaders fail to understand is that while teachers will attend the meeting because they are compelled to do so, they will be attending out of compliance. Those resistant to the idea of collaboration before will not embrace collaboration simply because the principal is in the room. By being present, a principal may increase attendance but has failed to address the root cause of the problem. A more appropriate response to the problem would be to confront the individual who is not engaged and seek—or if necessary require—more professional behavior.

Reason #5: It is an inefficient use of a principal’s time and talent.

When attending meetings consumes the day, there is simply not enough time to attend to all the other tasks that fill a principal’s to-do list. More importantly, this “one size fits all” approach ignores the fact that some teams need little support while others will benefit from extensive involvement by the principal. It is an illusion to believe that treating every team the same will provide the level of differentiation teams need to be successful. If the standard is that the principal will attend every meeting—whether the team needs them or not—the schedule may very well prevent principals from attending those team meetings where their help is truly needed.

When asked for the rationale that supports the practice of regularly attending every team meeting, principals offer a myriad of reasons but none of them justifies the continued use of this inefficient and ineffective practice.

A far better way to cultivate a culture of directed autonomy is to focus resources on building the capacity of teams to do

the work. We learn to be collaborative by collaborating and principals who feel they must attend team meetings so that teachers will stay focused and productive are really reflecting a lack of confidence in their teachers.

An effective way to respond to this fear is to train team leaders in ways to organize and run a good meeting. Giving team leaders the tools and strategies to design and deliver effective and efficient meetings ensures that meetings will be productive now and in the future. It makes sense that principals can foster more productive team meetings by training teams on how to be a better team.

Principals improve teams when they provide professional development around important structures like norms and protocols, roles and agendas, and goal setting and planning. They can also assist teams by modeling practices in faculty meetings that can be replicated in team meetings. Simply put, principals can do far more to help teams develop a culture of directed autonomy by providing them with the right tools and training than they could ever hope to accomplish by attending every team meeting.

Perhaps the best way to promote a culture of directed autonomy is to monitor the work products of the teams. If teams are responding to the critical questions of learning they will naturally generate products that demonstrate and document the topics they are discussing, the goals they are pursuing, and the outcomes they have achieved.

The foundation of excellent schools are high performing, self-directed, collaborative teams and a culture of directed autonomy is critical to their development. The most effective principals realize that instead of micromanaging teams by attending every meeting and monitoring what teams do every step along the way, principals would be better served to spend the same amount of time and energy training team leaders and monitoring the products the teams generate in the process of collaborating about teaching and learning. ■

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Resources

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