Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

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A work culture is not static. Culture is both a noun and a verb, and is shaped by the continued shared experiences of the group, and the processing of these experiences. The resulting adjustments in behaviors influence the beliefs and assumptions that ultimately become the new operating norms.

In schools, the quality of the adult culture directly affects the learning environment for students. The presence of a professional community that is centered on student learning makes a significant difference to measurable student achievement (Louis and Marks, 1998; Bolam et al., 2005).

The power of this connection compels us to examine and define the interactions between adults that produce the most positive results for learners and learning. That is, what makes a group culture powerful and what we can do to make it even more so?

The following seven qualities describe high performing groups. These qualities are lenses through which groups and individual group members can view their interactions to gain perspective on the choices that they are making and the skills they are applying as they work together.

Group development also requires personal development. When and how group members choose to participate emerges from individual and collective awareness and commitment to developing these attributes.

Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups
- Maintain a clear focus
- Embrace a spirit of inquiry
- Put data at the center
- Honor commitments to learners and learning
- Cultivate relational trust
- Seek equity
- Assume collective responsibility

Maintain a clear focus
High performing groups clarify desired results and define success criteria. Less productive groups meander from topic to topic, often within overcrowded agendas. Such groups use a scatter shot approach, in which all items are treated with equal importance. High performing groups agree on and protect priorities for themselves and their students, preserving precious time for focused engagement about the things that matter.

By establishing clear and measurable goals and using success criteria to determine progress, these groups can work in the present while holding longer-term visions for improvement. (Jaques & Cason, 1994). These groups are willing to sustain focus for extended periods of time. For example, achieving high levels of reading comprehension for all students requires significant attention and innovation in instructional and assessment practices. The results of these changes for large cohorts of students may not appear in the short term, but they will increase over time with ongoing monitoring and adjustments informed by data-driven conversations.

High performing groups manage and minimize the constant distractions. Agreed upon structures and signals supply “digression management”, particularly when time is short, energy is low and tasks are demanding. For example, prioritized and time-coded
Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

public agendas (based on agreed upon outcomes) with time monitoring, and shorthand language, such as “birdwalk alert” with permission to use it when digressions occur.

In these groups, members self-monitor, paying attention to themselves and each other, to gauge whether their contributions add to or detract from the group’s focus. There is an agreement that maintaining focus is more important than any individual’s desire to share an anecdote or elaboration.

*What are some indicators that your group’s mission and goals are clear to all?*

- *What are some things that keep your group focused?*
- *What are some distractions and ways you handle them?*

**Embrace a spirit of inquiry**

High performing groups ask genuine questions (Schwarz, 2002) about their own processes and practices, as well as their students’ learning. They inquire. By definition, inquiry is when you do not have a preferred response, or already know the answer. “Because questions are intrinsically related to action, they spark and direct attention, perception, energy, and effort, and so are at the heart of the evolving forms that our lives assume” (Goldberg, 1998, p.3). Less productive groups avoid ambiguity, uncertainty and challenging questions, wrapping themselves in and drawing upon the comfort of their existing knowledge base.

High performing groups are both problem seekers and problem solvers. These groups seek external resources and data outside their own experience. Such groups consider an “and/both” approach, not “right/wrong” or “either/or” responses, skillfully engaging in conflict with ideas, not with one another. They inquire into data to explore who is learning and who is not, seeking patterns and root causes before pursuing solutions and planning actions.

In these groups, members are willing to suspend their own judgments and opinions as they consider other perspectives. They are willing to delay solution generation. They push past surface ideas and avoid the comfort of quick conclusions, seeking external resources to extend their own knowledge base.

- *Given your group’s target goals, think about some “what if’s?”, “why not’s?” and other novel questions that might support your work.*
Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

Put data at the center
High performing groups use data to inform and guide group and student learning. These data focus and calibrate conversations. Less productive groups blur fact and opinion, occupying time with anecdote and argument. High performing groups tap multiple types and multiple sources of data to move their work forward. For example, a group might examine student work products, standardized test scores and classroom-based assessment to reveal a fuller picture of student performance in a specific skill area.

By exploring both formative and summative sources and using shared protocols and structures, these groups are able to depersonalize the data and use them as a catalyst for rich conversations about practice, learning, and progress towards desired goals. With skillful inquiry and balanced participation they delve beneath the surface features of the data, persevering in the quest for deeper understandings.

In these groups, members are assessment literate. They keep data central to the conversation, seeking out and using multiple sources and multiple types to inform their choices and plans. They make sure the data are available, visible and understood by everyone.

• What are some data sources your group taps to support its work?
• How is data used to focus your conversations; inform your progress?

Honor commitments to learners and learning
High performing groups keep learning as the focus of their discourse. They see themselves and all members as learners, and are willing to consider the limits of their own knowledge. This essential disposition energizes the learning potential within the group, and extends to high-powered learning for students. Less productive groups stay within the boundaries of their current capabilities and are satisfied with merely meeting expectations, not exceeding them; both for themselves and for their students.

High performing groups keep their focus on what is good for students, not just convenient for themselves. They explore the process, performance and products of learning. They also assess and monitor their own learning, reflecting on their processes and products, and setting goals for continuous improvement.

In these groups, members explore learning for all students, not just select groups. They seek to improve learning for the high performers, as well as those who may be struggling. As committed learners themselves, they understand that their students’ growth is linked to their own.

• What commitments are most important to your group?
• How do you establish and maintain priorities?
Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

Cultivate relational trust

High performing groups operate with high expectations and positive intentions as central assumptions. Within these groups, it is safe to display both high competence and vulnerability. In less productive groups, members fear attack or reprisal for things they might do or say, and are filled with doubt; having little or no faith that their colleagues will honor decisions or follow through on agreements. High performing groups rely on the integrity and competence of their colleagues inside and outside of the meeting room. When it is safe not to know, teachers seek the council of their peers, they don’t feel the need to hide their shortcomings (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). They can count upon fellow group members’ reliable and consistent application of team agreements to their own professional practice.

In these groups, members say what they’ll do and do what they said. They assume positive intentionality and believe in the good will of their colleagues. They understand the difference between a question and a critique. For this reason they are willing to be vulnerable and disclose both their successes and shortcomings, knowing that this information will not be exploited or belittled. They hold high expectations for themselves and each other and have faith that those expectations will be met and even exceeded.

- What is the degree of relational trust in your group (on a scale of 1-10)?
- What are some things that produce high and low levels of trust?

Seek equity

High performing groups leave titles, seniority and role authority at the door. On this level playing field, they seek a diverse blend of voices and protect space for all to contribute. Less productive groups limit participation and restrict divergent thought, sealing themselves in the protection of their own logic. They congratulate themselves for small successes and rationalize performance gaps.

High performing groups ensure reciprocity, foster interdependence and engage in productive collaboration. They apply structures to ensure that the data shy and the data literate have equal voice in the conversation as all strive for shared understanding. For example, creating smaller task groups that focus on large, shared data displays, using round-robin protocols to balance participation and publicly charting so ideas belong to everyone provides equity of opportunity to join the conversation.

In these groups, members operate from the assumption that everyone has something to offer. They monitor their own level of participation to be sure they are not dominating the conversation and make sure to encourage participation, especially from those who have not yet shared.

- How is participation balanced in your groups?
- What voices are represented? What other resources might be important to recruit?
Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

Assume collective responsibility

High performing groups make and honor agreements about who they want to be as a group and what they want to produce for their students. They make data-driven choices and are willing to be answerable for those choices. This collective efficacy, or the shared belief that together the group will successfully achieve its goals, is a prime resource for sustained improvements in student learning (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). In less productive groups, members are protective of their autonomy in the meeting room and in the classroom. They are unwilling to see others’ work as part of their own. They don’t believe that group members’ have the capability and willingness to make a difference.

Groups with high degrees of collective responsibility pursue challenging goals, exert concentrated effort and persist in collective action leading to improved performance, for the group and their students (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). In these groups, members believe in the power of the group to make a difference for students. They recognize that their individual choices, both in the meeting room and in their classrooms, affect everyone. Thus, they willingly invest their time and energy, setting aside personal agendas to support the group’s work and its development.

- *Share some aspect of your group work that engages ALL members and requires collective action?*

References


