

Weathering the Storm: Storming Strategies and Suggestions for Learning Teams

One of the harsh realities of collaborative work in schools is that learning teams often experience times of significant conflict between colleagues. These difficult moments—part of a broader stage of team development known as *storming*—are common, yet can seem overwhelming. Teachers embroiled in a storm often feel defeated and are tempted to walk away from their group. Moving teams beyond storming is essential for any learning community interested in long-term success.

This document outlines common issues that cause storms within teams and offers suggestions about how to move forward together. It is broken into two categories: “Strategies for Addressing Common Instructional Decisions” (pages 1 to 4) and “Strategies for Managing Group Dynamics and Discussions” (pages 5 to 8).

Strategies for Addressing Common Instructional Decisions		
Storming Topic	Reason for the Storm	Possible Weathering Strategies
<p>Teams struggle to come to consensus about an instructional strategy to try in the classroom.</p>	<p>Over time, teachers working in isolation grow to rely on a comfortable pattern of instructional practices they have perfected and in which they have great confidence. That can make consensus building around a shared instructional strategy challenging, as teachers are fully invested in the practices they have used successfully in previous years.</p> <p>What is more, adopting new instructional strategies can feel stifling to teachers used to making final decisions independent of group members. Fear can set in as teachers sense a loss in professional freedom and creativity.</p>	<p>The first step toward building consensus around an instructional strategy is to ensure that teachers can tailor shared lessons to their own particular teaching style or to the students that they serve.</p> <p>Maintaining a degree of professional flexibility will increase buy-in among all members of learning teams—particularly those whose original strategies are being set aside.</p> <p>Because new instructional strategies require additional time and effort on the part of teachers to deliver, it is also important to select an instructional strategy that most group members feel comfortable with tackling. Consider using a fun “light voting” strategy like Snowball to select an instructional strategy from a range of choices.</p> <p>In Snowball, teachers anonymously write a number down on a piece of paper rating their comfort level with a particular instructional strategy using the following scale:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This is a strategy I have absolutely no confidence in at all. 2. I am doubtful about this strategy and unsure that I can pull it off in my classroom. 3. This is a strategy I am neutral about right now. 4. I’m curious about this strategy and I am willing to give it a whirl even though it might challenge me.

		<p>5. I'm completely jazzed by this strategy and excited to try it in my classroom!</p> <p>After recording their comfort level, teachers crumple their paper and throw it—as if in a snowball fight—at their colleagues. Once ratings have been thrown a few times, releasing tension from a difficult conversation and ensuring individual anonymity, the group collects and records results.</p> <p>Instructional strategies that receive high percentages of 4 and 5 ratings should be tried before instructional strategies with high percentages of 1 and 2 ratings. By following this approach, teams guarantee that teachers will embrace efforts to introduce new instructional strategies.</p>
<p>Teams struggle to agree on which instructional strategy has been the most effective with students when presented with a range of choices.</p>	<p>Much like the challenge posed by coming to consensus on a new instructional strategy, identifying the <i>most effective</i> strategy is an intensely personal act for teachers who are passionate about their work. No one is comfortable wrestling with the idea that their efforts have been less than effective.</p> <p>As a result, teachers will often remain convinced that their instructional practices are <i>the best</i>—with or without tangible evidence.</p>	<p>One key to making effective decisions about instruction is to <i>rely on student-achievement data collected from either formative or summative assessments</i>. By relying on achievement data, personalities and passions are replaced by neutral observations as the driver for decisions.</p> <p>Consider making large, colorful displays of student-achievement data that can become a focal point for conversations. Similar to the <i>Go Visual</i> principle developed by nonverbal communications expert Michael Grinder (1997), large displays help to promote group ownership and engagement in the reflective process.</p> <p>What is more, posting large visuals away from a group helps to physically separate people from practices. Establishing distance between practitioners and results can make conversations about more effective instruction less personal and more professional.</p>
<p>Teams try to find consistency when scoring a common performance assessment or writing sample.</p>	<p>Scoring common performance assessments or writing samples is one of the most difficult grading tasks teams can tackle because decisions can often be subjective, based on personal decisions that are not completely transparent.</p>	<p>To take subjective elements out of the scoring of common performance assessments, groups should <i>develop a shared scoring rubric before the required task has been completed</i>. This rubric should be tied to state or district learning standards and be written in simple statements that can be clearly observed in student performance. Avoiding indicators that require teachers to infer whether or not a student is demonstrating mastery will add transparency to the grading process.</p>

	<p>Working from their own base of personal and professional experiences, teachers used to working in isolation may have completely different definitions of what mastery looks like. These definitions are rarely challenged until teachers begin to engage in collaborative work.</p>	<p>Do not underestimate how difficult these conversations can be. Common grading of performance tasks requires teams to wrestle with fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. These conversations are incredibly important, but they can be completely exhausting as well. To keep the process manageable, consider <i>focusing on one element of the performance at a time</i>. For example, teams could initially develop a shared rubric for grammar and usage in a writing assignment, leaving conversations about organization or ideas and content for a later date.</p>
<p>Teams decide to implement a common grading scale for all teachers in a particular grade level or subject area.</p>	<p>Grading has often been described as “the dragon of the schoolhouse” because few topics evoke as much passion in educators. Typically, the strongest debate surrounds the issue of homework completion and the value of long-term projects. Understanding that one function of school has always been to prepare children for the world of work, many educators feel that homework and long-term projects play an essential role in teaching children responsibility. Student grades, then, should be—to some degree—a reflection of a child’s performance in this area. Most parents tend to agree with this viewpoint because it reflects traditional grading practices used in schools over the past several decades. Other teachers realize that homework and long-term project completion rely on factors beyond a child’s control, such as the support and resources a child has available from parents and family members. They also believe that it is possible for a child to have an understanding of content even when homework or long-term projects are incomplete or poorly done. These teachers feel strongly that a student’s grade should be strictly a reflection of content mastery.</p>	<p>A common compromise between these two very different viewpoints is to become more sophisticated in the way parents and students are given feedback about performance. Many teams begin by <i>separating work behaviors from academic content mastery</i> while grading student assignments. For example, a math teacher who has assigned thirty-five problems for homework can provide two grades to students: one reflecting the level of <i>computational mastery</i> demonstrated in the problems the student completed and a second reflecting the level of <i>responsibility</i> demonstrated by the student based on the <i>number of required problems</i> the student completed. By doing so, the teacher can clearly identify both the level of academic mastery students demonstrate and the kinds of individual work behaviors children have yet to master. This information provides far more specific feedback to parents about what a child knows and is able to do in classroom situations. Teachers who use such a grading system often break larger projects or tests down into several different individual grades. A project may earn one score for content mastery, one for grammar and mechanics, one for presentation, and one for following directions. While each grade is weighted equally, the task itself is worth more because it has received four scores instead of one or two.</p>

<p>Teams look at data and discover that one person has the lowest scores in the group.</p>	<p>Inevitably, when teams begin to look at the results of common assessments, one teacher is going to have the lowest scores in the group. This reality is often the single greatest barrier preventing teams from looking at student work together.</p> <p>As Mel Levine—author of <i>The Myth of Laziness</i> (2002)—argues, no one wants to feel like a failure. Instead, everyone wants to be successful. The risk of having poor scores serves as a powerful disincentive for teachers, discouraging them from engaging in meaningful conversations about student learning.</p>	<p>Trust has to form the foundation of any learning team that begins to use data to inform their decision making. Before teachers will willingly share the results of their work, they must feel safe with their colleagues. This safety is only built through shared experiences with data over a long period of time.</p> <p>Consider structuring early experiences carefully, collecting and reporting data at the team level only. Also, pursue data from learning experiences in which students are likely to experience high degrees of success. By doing so, teachers are likely to be more receptive toward results because students will have high rates of mastery and the team will have done well as a unit.</p> <p>It is also valuable for teams and teachers to semantically embrace the idea that <i>data study is about identifying effective practices, not effective people</i>. By focusing on the practice rather than the person, teams depersonalize data conversations, making them safer for all involved. Teachers are less likely to fear having the worst results if those results are seen as a reflection of an ineffective instructional practice rather than a reflection of an ineffective person.</p>
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Thoughts and Reflections

Which of these storming situations is your team currently working through? How will you address these challenges together? What kinds of support do you need from administrators or instructional support staff members to effectively address these challenges?

Strategies for Managing Group Dynamics and Discussions		
Storming Topic	Reason for the Storm	Possible Weathering Strategies
<p>One group member takes control of meetings.</p> <p>Some people may be afraid to speak up and share ideas because of fear of not being accepted by the team.</p>	<p>Often, initial team meetings can be disorganized and difficult affairs, primarily because teams have yet to establish a clear picture of exactly what collaboration looks like.</p> <p>Action-oriented people will often step into the leadership void during these moments out of a personal desire to push teams forward. For these members, group meetings that lack a clear purpose or direction can seem frustrating and their decisive responses can come across as bullying to peers.</p>	<p>To function effectively, all teams must develop a set of norms or operating procedures that clearly define how meetings will run and how decisions are going to be made. By defining these behaviors ahead of time, and then holding team members accountable for abiding by team norms, groups can often prevent confusion over who is in charge or reduce feelings of being bullied.</p> <p>Groups interested in ensuring that leadership within a team is shared often design a norm stating that the moderator's role for each team meeting will rotate through all of the members of a group. By doing so, each team member has opportunities to guide the conversation of individual meetings and to develop leadership capacity.</p> <p>Many teams also adhere to a simple rule: <i>silence is consent</i>. This rule implies that if team members choose not to get involved in a conversation with an overbearing team member, they are willing to accept the group's decisions. By doing so, the responsibility for engaging in conversations is on each individual group member.</p>
<p>Group members frequently interrupt conversations with their own ideas.</p>	<p>The work of professional learning teams can be incredibly energizing for teachers who have grown accustomed to working in isolation. Collaborative conversations can quickly begin to spin off in new directions as teachers professionally brainstorm with one another.</p> <p>While this brainstorming is often quite beneficial and generally rewarding, it can lead to frustration and tension between colleagues, particularly when dominant personalities command more attention and time than passive members of the group.</p>	<p>The degree to which a weathering strategy is needed to address interruptions varies depending on the level of concern the interruptions raise in individual group members. Some teams and individuals have a higher tolerance for interruptions than others.</p> <p>Nevertheless, managing conversations requires teams to create a norm or operating procedure to address how interjections should be handled in group conversations. While this may seem to be a bit childish at first, norms governing the flow of collaborative conversations help to provide structure for, and introduce efficiency to, meetings.</p> <p>Many groups use a strategy known as <i>Post-it Extensions</i> to control interruptions. In such groups, all team members are provided with a pad of sticky notes at the beginning of a meeting. As a conversation begins, participants write down initial reactions and responses on individual notes without comment. Then, as each agenda item is completed, the whole group shares and discusses the notes.</p>

<p>Divisions exist between veteran group members and those who join an existing group as new members.</p>	<p>Much of what defines learning teams are shared experiences and conversations held over long periods of time. Trust grows among group members who have grown to understand and to value their peers. Productive conflict—a critical element for effective teams—is possible because colleagues feel safe with one another.</p> <p>When new members are added to a group, they bring a set of preconceived notions about what education and group work look like. These notions may conflict with foundational beliefs that are held by veteran group members, causing tension that must be resolved.</p> <p>What is more, veteran members of highly functioning learning teams feel a real sense of loss when peers are replaced. This commitment to individuals can serve as a barrier when new members are introduced.</p>	<p>The primary responsibility for ensuring that new teams can work effectively with one another falls on the shoulders of building principals. Administrators who <i>carefully consider personal and professional relationships when reorganizing teams</i> ease transitions and facilitate new work.</p> <p>Teams that are experiencing turnover must begin by <i>revisiting their norms</i>, or operating procedures, because these norms describe the basic interactions that occur between members. Teams cannot function efficiently until they have an agreed-upon set of norms. These conversations will force teams to wrestle with core issues and provide early opportunities for teams to build consensus.</p> <p>Once teams have a set of agreed-upon norms, it is important for members to <i>collaborate on specific, achievable tasks with new peers</i>. These shared experiences help build credibility and acceptance between new colleagues.</p>
<p>Members of a group need different amounts of time to make decisions, and group members feel as if their ideas are not being respected or equally valued.</p>	<p>These problems are common challenges collaborative teams face in any work situation simply because individuals bring a wide variety of personalities to the team table.</p> <p>Some people act like hammers, making decisive decisions and taking quick action, while others act like rulers, carefully measuring a decision from multiple angles before taking action. Some put great emphasis on preserving relationships, recognizing that results are useless when trust is destroyed. Others are driven by results and processes instead of relationships.</p>	<p>To address these challenges, many teams begin each year by <i>completing a personality inventory together</i>. Doing so enables teammates to have open conversations about the range of personalities that exist within their group. Awareness of differences allows colleagues to embrace strengths and understand seemingly unpredictable behaviors as a natural part of who someone is. Over time, this awareness informs almost every interaction between peers, helping to prevent painful misunderstandings.</p> <p>Personality typing can also help to identify roles or tasks that group members are most likely to thrive in. Organized and detail-oriented individuals can accept responsibility for team-meeting agendas and required reports, while those driven by relationships can reach out to other teams, building collaborative bridges between departments.</p>

<p>The team frequently drifts from the meeting agenda and fails to finish within the time period allotted for collaborative work.</p>	<p>While different approaches to problem solving and human interactions are completely natural and normal, they can result in conflict between individuals with different styles.</p>	<p>One of the best ways to ensure that teams finish work within the period of time allotted for collaborative work is to set <i>structured tasks for early meetings</i>. Teams could be asked to produce a set of norms or to develop a common assessment on a topic of study. They can develop curriculum maps for upcoming units or a shared lesson.</p> <p>When leaders define clear outcomes for initial meetings, they remove the ambiguity of collaborative work. No longer do conversations revolve around the question, <i>What is it we're supposed to be doing?</i> Instead, conversations center on the question, <i>How do we get there?</i> Structured results in successful experiences build momentum within learning teams, providing models for future conversations.</p> <p>In extreme cases, it may be necessary to <i>bring in an outside facilitator</i> to help teams identify the norms of behavior that are interfering with efficient teamwork. After observing for several meetings, facilitators can share honest observations about what it is that is drawing teams off task and provide suggestions about new behaviors that may help focus collaborative work.</p> <p>This facilitator should be a trusted friend or colleague from a highly functioning learning team who has experience in understanding team dynamics. Administrators are not generally a good choice for this role, as advice may come across as evaluation to team members. This complex dynamic can decrease safety and honesty in meetings unless an administrator has built an unusually accepting atmosphere with his or her faculty.</p>
<p>Team members struggle to keep positive attitudes and slip into constant complaining about the challenges of collective action.</p>	<p>A part of this challenge can be related to the individual personality traits of group members. While relationship-driven members may find inherent value in visiting with one another during team meetings, results-oriented members grow frustrated when a team is unable to complete tasks as scheduled.</p> <p>Another source of challenge is the initially ambiguous nature of collaborative work. Teachers are not accustomed to working together, so there is little understanding of how to productively focus a meeting between peers. Facilitation skills are generally low early in the learning community experience, and meetings can suffer as a result.</p>	<p>Many noted learning community experts—including Richard DuFour and Mike Schmoker—argue that the best way to tackle negative attitudes is to <i>celebrate small successes frequently</i>. Recognizing that collaboration is difficult, successful teams seek out evidence that collective work is also worthwhile.</p>
<p>Team members struggle to keep positive attitudes and slip into constant complaining about the challenges of collective action.</p>	<p>Let's face it, collaboration is difficult work! Decisions that individuals once made quickly and easily take much longer when consensus is required. What is more, teachers possess deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning that are challenged once opened to others in collaborative work groups.</p>	<p>Many noted learning community experts—including Richard DuFour and Mike Schmoker—argue that the best way to tackle negative attitudes is to <i>celebrate small successes frequently</i>. Recognizing that collaboration is difficult, successful teams seek out evidence that collective work is also worthwhile.</p>

Finally, change is never easy, regardless of the situation. Think about the family that is asked to move when a spouse is transferred or the individual who tries to break a habit like smoking. Whether personal or professional, new challenges force individuals to work in different ways, introducing discomfort and frustration.

This discomfort and frustration inevitably leads to one thing: complaining! It is simply an unavoidable side effect of change.

This evidence may take the form of student scores on a shared assessment or a successful parent night the team planned together. It might take the form of a jointly developed document such as a curriculum map or a common assessment. It might also be increased attendance numbers because of engaging instruction, comments from satisfied students or parents, or informal observations shared by administrators or peers.

Regardless of the form celebrations take, *they should happen often and be made public*. Dedicate a wall of the work room to recorded successes from a range of teams throughout the building. Make celebrations an established item on every meeting agenda. Advertise accomplishments in community newspapers or at regularly scheduled school events.

Eventually, the weight of evidence that collaboration is driving productive change in your building will crush complaints—and constant complainers—before they begin.

Thoughts and Reflections

Which of these storming situations is your team currently working through? How will you address these challenges together? What kinds of support do you need from administrators or instructional support staff members to address these challenges effectively?