
Title	Teamwork in schools: Consensus may be damaging to your health
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Source	<i>ERA Conference, Singapore, 24-26 November 1997</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

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Teamwork in schools: Consensus may be damaging to your health

Kenneth Stott and Allan Walker

There is little to be gained from rehearsing the contention that we live in a time of enormous change. Ask any school principal in virtually any system about the changes which confront him or her, and you will be swamped with examples of how unprecedented and unforeseen policies, plans and directives have posed a sometimes overwhelming challenge to our contemporary educational institutions.

It is in that context - one that encompasses the uncertainty, the unpredictability and the unknowability of change - that we wanted to discover how school leaders were using team work to meet these unprecedented challenges. We thus asked heads of department and vice-principals in Singapore how they experienced working in teams with their senior colleagues.

The research offers an alternative perspective on the work of teams. We think that school managers, like 'mainstreamers' in management, have been lulled into managing the static and stable. We doubt whether this is appropriate at the present time. Teamwork takes place, we contend, in situations characterised by instability and dynamic change. Managing teams, therefore, must adopt a different focus.

This paper has a somewhat provocative title. It was used not only to attract some interest, but also to stir up some feeling on an issue with which we have become too comfortable. Consensus has become seen as a *sine qua non* of effective teamwork. It is our intention, therefore, to take this particular standpoint and to disturb the peace!

School management teams

We collected the main data which were used for this study in Singapore primary schools. Since then, we have spoken to many managers about teamwork and what is going on in their schools, so our discussion has several sources of influence.

To keep the message incisive, this paper is short. For clarity's sake, we have not peppered it with methodological and statistical detail. For a fuller account of our work, you can refer to Portsmouth, Stott and Walker (1998 in press).

Team meetings

The management team meetings which our informants told us about were nothing unusual: information giving, a bit of discussion, the odd dose of delegation - those sorts of things. What was missing was any emphasis on the *process*. For example, no one told us about questioning assumptions, challenging different views and opening up contentious issues.

You need to do those things if you are to move forward. They are critical if you want to be creative (a popular word in Singapore right now.) Yet, everything pointed to management teams trying to remain static: to do the same things, only better perhaps. They did not even consciously try to build team spirit - not in an ongoing way, anyhow. Perhaps teamwork is not really as important as it is made out to be?

Our first point, then, is that teams need to devote some time away from simply *doing* things and to work out how they can operate better. This means opening up a lot of things that some principals would rather stay closed, like disagreement.

Efficiency

The general impression of the purposes served by senior management team meetings was one of efficiency: doing things properly. Some teams run on auto-pilot. Nothing really changes. Innovation and creativity are replaced by doing things right. A team will never be a great team unless it exposes issues of difference, instability and unpredictability, and dwells less on prediction and control.

This, of course, is difficult for those who have an almost hypnotic belief in their ability (unproved, it has to be said) to predict and control change. Recent experiences in Singapore education - and, of course, many other systems - suggest that change or the outcomes of change can be neither predicted nor controlled.

The principal's role

We asked team members in thirty eight schools about their principals and the roles they played in their management teams. The role of 'final decision maker' was the highest scoring item. Sadly, in our opinion, more than half the teams considered that the role of 'one of the team' did not apply to their principal. Moreover, twenty-one teams considered the role of 'despot or dictator' to have been applicable to their respective principals. In five teams, the 'dictator' role was ranked in the top three!

Some principals, it appeared, stuck with the hierarchical approach and took a fairly directive role. Their largely task-oriented behaviour was characterised by advising, direction setting and - in a few cases - dictating. Perhaps this is their interpretation of what is expected of them. After all, there has been much talk of 'strong' leadership: it is hardly surprising that some see this as being the general in command of the troops and in sole charge of all decisions.

If the present amount and complexity of change throws up anxiety for schools, one neat way of containing it is to absorb it yourself. Don't let others share in decisions. Avoid the questioning of assumptions, beliefs and values. In that way, the fear of failure is reduced, and you can tell others you a conflict-free happy family! But is it the answer? We'll come back to answer that in a moment.

Some principals were quite open with their teams. They stated problems and opened up discussion. Some principals offered ready-made solutions and then asked for comments. These approaches sound to be fine, but the evidence suggested that they were quite limited in the way they did things.

Consensus

A previous phase of the project (Stott and Walker, 1992) found that primary, school principals believed themselves to be consensual when reaching decision outcomes. Teams in the present study confirmed the prevalence of the consensual mode. Indeed, well over one-third of teams spent most of the time in senior management meetings seeking consensus about decisions. It seemed as though the rhetoric of consensus had struck hard. Teams had discovered two neat ways of avoiding anxiety: one was to hide under the blanket of consensus; the other, as we have already mentioned, was to off-load decisions to the leader and thus to avoid having to share the discomfort of responsibility.

At the risk of over-simplifying the data, our research suggested there were two types of teams. There were those who were prepared to open up the difference and diversity amongst members in order to find better solutions to problems. They were like Mrs Lim's team, which we shall learn about in a short while. In contrast, the consensual teams, with their open-style principals, and the teams who gave the decision making to their directive leaders may have been more concerned with dissipating the anxiety.

Implications for management teams

Despite our intention to be practical, we still have difficulty transposing the notions of anxiety, difference and uncertainty into something of use for those who have to manage schools. What we are trying to say is that it is the *nature* of the relationship between leaders and their teams that will determine how successfully teams work in the present context of dynamic change.

If you focus on doing things efficiently, you are probably trying to maintain an overwhelmingly stable system. You do the existing things well. You probably get people to conform. You probably talk about common visions, common missions, common goals and the like, and getting

people to conform to them. That is usually a recipe for ordinariness. Some people call it mediocrity!

We are arguing for something different. We want management teams to be beyond the ordinary. This will mean having managers who can perform a clever balancing act. On the one hand, leaders must contain the anxiety of change to some extent so that things don't get completely out of hand; on the other, they have to open up challenge, diversity and creative new directions, and expose their teams to the discomfort and anxiety of an uncertain future.

Rather than concentrate on consensus or control, the role of senior management teams should be concerned with being *partners in learning*. Unfortunately, what we have seen in some teams is a case of *colluders in sameness*. Instead of learning from difference, they have suppressed their diversity. With the emphasis on consensus and conformity, the quest has obviously been for ordinariness.

In practical terms, how do principals provoke partnerships in learning? The real answer should come from school principals and their teams as they develop new relationships. There are, after all, some great principals doing some great things with their management teams. A new theory should stem from new practice. But that, we know, is not entirely helpful. We'll tell you a little tale which might make the point better than yet more theory:

At her senior management team meeting, Mrs Lim, principal of Anchorpoint Secondary School, explained how she wanted to make progress with implementing a broader professional development programme and was hoping that all teachers would produce training plans by the end of the year.

"It will never work," said Anthony Tan, one of the heads of department. "The teachers have had enough already: IT, creativity, national education. Their feet haven't touched the ground for the last three months."

Anthony was one for speaking up. In the past, the previous principal had described him as an awkward customer and even got him a place on a head of department training course in order to get rid of him for a year or so. But Mrs Lim was different. She reckoned that there is something to learn from whatever anyone says.

She split the management team into two. One group, led by Anthony, was to come to the meeting a week later with all the reasons why her idea about training plans could not work.

The other group was to gather ideas on how it could be made to work. Both groups were to talk to teachers and get their views.

At the subsequent meeting, lots of problems and issues were thrashed out. Mrs Lim managed to explore some of the very different value positions of her team members which guided their opinions. For example, several believed that teachers work best in isolation and should be allowed to dictate what they did, whereas others felt the real value of professional development was to young teachers only. Mrs Lim saw it as important to debate these beliefs and to ask her colleagues to examine their assumptions. After all, it would be difficult to move forward unless such views could be brought into the open and learned from.

Because of the work of Anthony's group, they had exposed things they had not thought about. They even discussed some of the deeply held beliefs about training amongst the older members of staff. For example, many, quite surprisingly, thought professional development was a punitive measure against staff who could not do things.

After a thorough debate, it was commonly agreed that they could not go ahead as originally planned by Mrs Lim. The approach would have to be modified. One of their strategies was to persuade some of the more experienced staff to act as trainers and coaches to less experienced staff and to help the latter put together training plans. Mrs Lim thanked Anthony profusely for being prepared to speak up in the first place. She made it clear that the least effective people in her team were the head-nodders, the 'yes' people.

There were some other ideas as well, but the essence of this little vignette is that the team accepted difference and then learned from it. It avoided the quick and easy consensus, which would have been fragile, anyway, as we know that team members were not in unanimous accord about what should be done. There is no doubt that they embraced change in an effective way. How different

from those teams that reach an immediate consensus or simply accept what the leader says without daring to question.

If you want to model what happened here, it was a process of dissensus building, debate of the issues, and then agreement about should be done. This needs quality leaders, though. As Wee Heng Tin, Singapore's Director General of Education, said in a speech to principals in August 1997 when talking about the tensions of difference and diversity: 'If there is good leadership, the tension should be creative. However, under poor management, it degenerates into conflicts.' For those leaders who fail to build a creative tension and say that they have no conflicts, they simply cannot see what is going on below the surface. Suppressing difference does not mean it is not there.

A final thought...

We have to challenge the prevailing management wisdom. Why? Because it stemmed from a time when things were comfortable and stable. It won't work now. If you don't believe us, dig up old planning documents and see if the plans have come to fruition. Unlikely, unless your school is of another context. In that light, we see an overbearing emphasis on consensus as potentially damaging to team health, because, beneath that surface lies much difference which has not been explored.

The whole issue of sameness has to be tackled, we suggest. The notions of common visions, common goals, common values, suggest to us that some people are deceiving themselves. They are claiming sameness where sameness simply doesn't exist. But why should this be worrying? If people have different values, beliefs, opinions and even visions of the future, isn't there a case for learning from this rich source of diversity? Why try to suppress it?

We hope that leaders and their teams will take heart from the fact that strong, synergistic teamwork is more likely to emerge from accepting and then learning from difference, than from conformity and consensus seeking. This requires breaking away from old patterns, but our view is that it will be worth it as we move forward to exciting new realms of educational change.

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