

A Guide for Teacher-Powered Site Administrators

*Collaborative Leadership
for Thriving Teams*

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Topic 5: Managing Conflict

All teams have conflict. The goal of course is to have conflict that ultimately leads to improvements and bonding over shared experiences. Leading your team away from the edge of unhealthy conflicts and creating healing relationships is a vital skill set of any leader. Teacher-powered teams thrive not because they don't have conflict, but because they have mutual trust with each other and are committed to working it out for the greater good of their students and community.

“Conflict can be *healthy* and *unhealthy*.

Healthy conflict brings group members closer to each other and contributes to strengthening the work or product they're focused on. Unhealthy conflict does the opposite. It erodes trust among teammates and distracts the group from their goals and objectives.”

Elena Aguilar
The Art of Coaching Teams



Reflection Questions for Individuals

1. Reflect on ways you typically handle conflict. Do you tend to embrace it head on; do you prefer to have a mediator; do you avoid confrontation?

2. Think about a conflict that ended positively. What role did you play?

3. Think about a conflict that ended poorly. What would you do differently in a similar situation?



Team Conversation Starters

1. What strategies does your team use when dealing with a conflict between team members?
2. What are some ways your team facilitates healthy conflict? How do you build trust with and among your team?
3. Talk about the hard conversations... Why are they necessary, how do you have them, and how do you encourage your team to have them with each other? What are some ways your team takes personal accountability in personal conflicts without relying on an administrator to intervene? When should someone intervene?



Common Challenges

People are challenging, some more than others. Personalities, high maintenance team members, and differences in processing emotions lead to frustrating experiences. As one of our participants shared, “When there is upset involving those people their reactions get in the way of the collegial spirit we committed to.” When this occurs, finding someone (not necessarily you) to deescalate the situation and bring people back to the collaborative cultural norms is helpful. Identify peacemakers on your team and ask them to mediate when tensions arise.

Teacher-powered is not for everyone. There are excellent teachers who might not want to be involved with leadership or decision-making. Helping people understand if the school isn't a good fit culturally solves a lot of conflict problems. Letitia says it well: “commit to why you're here, coalesce around your school's mission, and if you're not down with riding on this bus, you can ride on another one!”



Tips and Tricks

Embrace the Hard Conversations

- The best way to solve problems is getting to the core of the issue. **Don't make assumptions, ask questions.** Michele writes, “We are also honest where we may diverge in our thoughts or feelings and take an honest approach so we can build towards shared values as a team.”
- **Keep the focus on students** and bring the conversation back to your team's shared purpose. “When a conflict or dilemma is interfering with the goal of educating our students, the hard conversation becomes necessary, and that is how I approach the conversation – by pulling the person in privately, saying we have this problem and it is hurting in this way and we have to get past it for the good of our students,” says Alissa.
- Ayla shares, “When things are not going well we talk, talk, talk and write, write, write. Providing direct feedback is the best way we go about creating a balance. The feedback begins as any feedback does with best hopes for learning and growth. That same feedback can be used as documentation or the basis for a written directive if the feedback was not taken and the cause of concern was not addressed in some other way by the person not meeting expectations.” **Continue moving the conversation forward toward a resolution**, even if it means small steps.

Humanize the Conflict

- When emotions are high it is easy to see others as the enemy. **Take time to focus on the individuals and relate to everyone as a colleague**, not a problem. “There are a lot of discussions around ‘so-and-so doesn’t do as much work as the rest of us’ and the need for work-life balance. Some people have decided that they can achieve this balance by not taking responsibilities, which makes the others who won’t let things drop more bitter about their work-life balance... I think that one way to ease the tension around this is to make sure that we are doing more work around humanizing and maintaining relationships. When we see where each person is at personally we are less likely to put burdens on them,” encourages Jeff.
- “We all come with baggage, some heavier than others or more bags than the one allotted for the trip, and how we manage ourselves becomes the most impactful piece of conflict resolution. Navigating conflict is something we have worked through with intention and by nature of force,” writes Anna. **Take time to get to know everyone and what is going on in their lives.** Sometimes understanding another’s challenges and empathizing with them takes the tension out of the conflict.

Use Consistent Protocols

- Many teacher-powered schools **use the same mediation system with adults in the building as they use with students**, for example restorative justice practices.
- **Setting clear expectations for behavior ahead of time** keeps everyone accountable to themselves and each other. “We always agree not to leave the meeting and talk negatively or listen to someone else talk negatively. If you don’t say it in the group, you are agreeing to the decisions made,” says Alissa.
- “Having a person with facilitation training who is not directly part of the conflict manage how the conflict is confronted is super important. The facilitator should do as much as possible to remove fear from the situation by giving participants a sort of agenda for the resolution meeting,” shares Jeff. When a conflict reaches the point where mediation is necessary, **having a planned facilitator keeps things professional and helps defuse the tension.**

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