

Don't Settle for High-Functioning Teams

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If there were a pharmaceutical commercial for a struggling team, it would probably sound like this:

If you've ever sat in on a team meeting:

- *Struggling to follow a circuitous conversation*
- *Wondering what the heck people are talking about*
- *Feeling as if the meeting could have been shorter*
- *Fantasizing about joining the awesome team next door that you hear laughing through the wall*

Then your team is likely suffering from low function.

No one wants to be a member of the team just described. All teams want to be what is commonly referred to as “high functioning,” where members work well together and are productive. But, is getting along and getting things done a high enough bar for our teams when student learning is at stake? Consider the following story.

Say you sat in on two teams, Team A and Team B, and this is what you observed:

TEAM A	TEAM B
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follows norms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breaks norms.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shares team roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All roles fall on the team leader.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reaches consensus on goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fails to reach consensus on goals.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adheres to agendas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strays from agendas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follows data protocols.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Veers off data protocols.

Which team might concern you more? (Put a different way, which team would you *not* want to spend 4,000 minutes with each year?) Chances are you said Team B. This is a team that isn't getting along. They don't share responsibility for team commitments, can't reach agreement, and are off-task in meetings. Conversations wander. Not only do they fail to reach their goals, they struggle just to agree on one. This is a low-functioning team. Team A, on the other hand, seems to be really cooking with gas. Most would describe them as high functioning.

The first chart compares Team A to Team B through what I refer to as a *function lens*. We determine how a team is doing by assessing their collegiality, organization, efficiency, productivity, and so on. Looking through this function lens, it is obvious that we would most likely put our efforts into helping Team B. We have no concerns about Team A, but should we?

Let's look through the same function lens to compare the same Team A against a new team—Team C—and ask the same question: Which team might concern you more?

TEAM A	TEAM C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows norms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows norms.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shares team roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shares team roles.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaches consensus on goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaches consensus on goals.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adheres to agendas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adheres to agendas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows data protocols. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows data protocols.

Through the function lens, Team A and Team C look exactly the same. Both are high functioning; neither is concerning. But, what if we were to switch out our function lens for an *impact lens*? A lens that does not ask: *How is the team working together? Are they getting things done?* But, instead, asks: *What are they getting done? And what student-learning outcomes result from what they are doing together?* In business this lens is often referred to as performance.

When we compare Teams A and C through an *impact lens*, we suddenly see things we didn't see when only looking through the *function lens*. See the examples in the following chart.

TEAM A	TEAM C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows norms (e.g., <i>We agree to disagree without being disagreeable</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows norms (e.g., <i>We agree to actively solicit alternate viewpoints</i>).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shares team roles (e.g., <i>Mrs. M is the meeting note-taker</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shares team roles (e.g., <i>Mrs. M is the lesson demonstration teacher</i>).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaches consensus on goals (e.g., <i>By the end of our team cycle, teachers will teach a, b, and c</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reaches consensus on goals (e.g., <i>By the end of our team cycle, students will have learned x, y, and z</i>).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adheres to agendas (e.g., <i>Item 2: Discussion about . . .</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adheres to agendas (e.g., <i>Item 2: Discuss . . . so that we leave here with a plan for . . .</i>).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows data protocols (e.g., <i>We follow the steps of a data dialogue protocol</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows data protocols (e.g., <i>We suspend assumptions during the inference phase of the protocol</i>).

Through the lens of impact, Team A now becomes a concern. Although Team A stays productive by following norms, distributing roles, setting goals, and using

agendas and protocols, they will not impact student learning in the way that Team C can.

For instance, both Teams A and C follow norms. But Team A is only focused on the manner in which the team members talk to one another, not the impact of their talk. Make no mistake; this is important for how the group functions, but Team C goes a step further. They set an agreement to value diversity of thought and flexible thinking, two things known to help groups avoid groupthink and arrive at better decisions.

The word *impact* is ubiquitous thanks to the body of works from leaders in the professional learning field, such as Jim Knight (e.g., 2013), Joellen Killion (e.g., 2018), Nancy Love (e.g., Love et al., 2015), Thomas Guskey (e.g., 2016), Paul Bloomberg and Barb Pitchford (e.g., Bloomberg & Pitchford, 2017), and many others. And thank goodness it is. This makes us pause and evaluate the effects of what we do. John Hattie (2021) in his visible learning meta-analyses makes clear that not all practices have the same effect size on student learning and achievement. “Know thy impact” is a meme I’m sure you’ve seen. This is as true for our individual work with students as it is for our teams’ work.

In fact, through an impact lens, even our pharmaceutical commercial would sound differently:

If you’ve ever sat in on a team meeting:

- *Unsure if the work your team gets done is the stuff kids need*
- *Wondering why your kids’ learning problems keep persisting*
- *Excited to implement change, but not knowing how*
- *Enjoying the collegiality, but wishing you left the meeting with more*
- *Fantasizing about joining the awesome team next door that you see is making a measurable difference for kids*

Then your team is likely suffering from low impact.

There are a number of studies and syntheses over the last two decades in which researchers and thought leaders study what successful schools do in their teams versus what those in low-performing schools do. Most differences fall within the area of impact. (There can be pockets of high-performing teams in low-performing schools and vice versa.) The characteristics of these teams seem to be consistent. Here are a few standouts. Teams in highly successful schools have been reported to:

- View collaboration as a catalyst for improvement (Little, 2012)
- Challenge conventional notions (Horn, 2007)
- Openly express uncertainty and seek help (Timperley, 2008)

- Engage in talk that plunges people into consciousness (MacDonald, 2013)
- Discover insight into teaching and learning (Little, 2012)
- Establish social relationships of equal status, intellectual openness, and possibilities for critique and creative thought (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007)
- Feel a moral responsibility to meet the social and cognitive needs of all children (Lindsey et al., 2009)
- Apply learning to practice (Argyris, 1993)

The moves in this book provide actionable ways to do all of this and more.

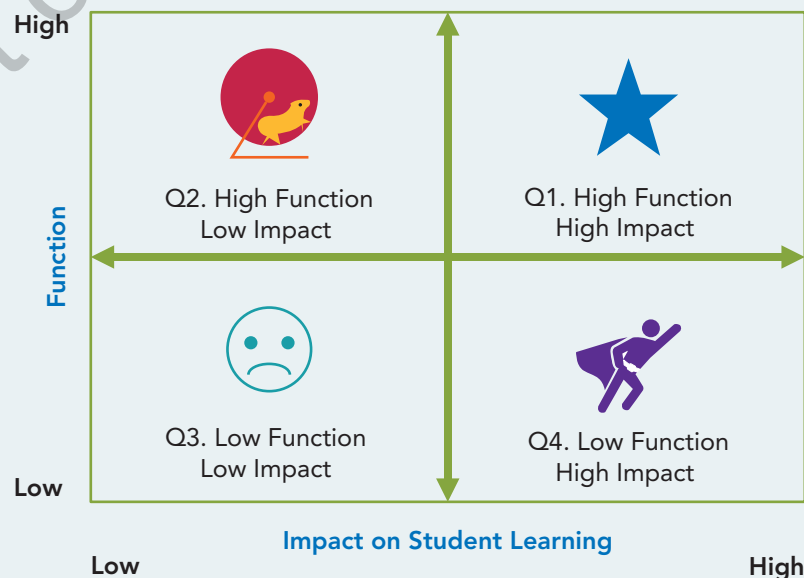
Teams in less successful schools have been reported to:

- Get caught up in activity traps with vaguely defined purposes for looking at data (Timperley, 2008)
- Engage in talk that resembles an organizational routine rather than a deliberate means to improve outcomes for students (MacDonald, 2013)
- Participate in protocols that privilege form over substance—in other words, teams value procedures more than insightful, actionable learning (Timperley, 2008)

The Team Function, Impact Matrix

Skillful team leaders (STLs) and their teams intentionally view their teams through dual lenses: function *and* impact. Once you begin to do so, you see that being successful in one does not guarantee success in the other. Put function and impact side by side on a matrix, and four types of teams emerge (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Team Function, Impact Matrix



For those unfamiliar with the Team Function, Impact Matrix (first presented in *The Skillful Team Leader* [MacDonald, 2013, p. 31]), I include a primer as follows:

Q1. High Function, High Impact

- *Greatest asset: Progress*
- *Greatest hurdle: Sustainability*

Quadrant 1 (Q1) teams are most desirable. These teams are consistently high functioning and high impact. They most often work well together, enjoy meeting as a group, and move the needle for student learning. Progress is visible.

The biggest challenge for Q1 teams is sustainability of results. Without a plan to sustain success, teams can experience burnout, or adopt a “quit while we are ahead” group mentality, and slip into one of the other quadrants of the matrix.

Q2. High Function, Low Impact

- *Greatest asset: Collegiality and momentum*
- *Greatest hurdle: Collegiality and momentum*

Quadrant 2 (Q2) teams consist of members who get along well, are highly invested in the team’s work, and are efficient at doing the work. However, despite functioning like a well-oiled machine, they have little to no collective impact on student learning. Q2 teams end up on a fast-spinning hamster wheel, working really hard but getting nowhere they need to be. The learning challenges students had when the team first met are still there when the team adjourns. For instance, weekly meetings for a Q2 team might be dedicated to writing a thoughtful curriculum unit that is never implemented. Or, team members might implement lessons, but never collectively look at the impact of those lessons on student learning.

The upside of a Q2 team: They are collegial and have momentum. The downside of a Q2 team: They are collegial and have momentum. Yep. Double-edged sword. The team leader won’t have any trouble getting this group to meet. There will be little, if any, conflict among group members, and they will accomplish whatever they set out to do. But that collective drive for getting things done makes it hard for leaders of Q2 teams to slow down and change direction to focus on tasks that will have a greater impact on student learning.

Q3. Low Function, Low Impact

- *Greatest asset: Ready for a fresh start*
- *Greatest hurdle: Morale*

No team wants to reside in Quadrant 3 (Q3). Dysfunction and low impact characterize teams that land here on the matrix. It makes sense that a team who can’t get along

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or be productive would also have little to no impact on learning. Q3 teams typically linger too long in what Bruce Tuckman (1965) calls the forming stage where they can't come to consensus on purpose. Without an agreed-upon direction, they can't collectively have an impact on learning. Some Q3 teams make it past the forming stage but struggle to move past Tuckman's storming stage, which is marked by gossip, bickering, complaining, and overall "fed-up-ness," a clear indicator of low function.

The wheels on Q3 teams don't always squeak from the start. Some groups begin as high-functioning Q2 teams. They start out working well together, but over time the fruits of their labor aren't visible. No matter how collegial the group is, people begin to lose interest if they don't see their collaboration positively impacting their practice or their students' learning. Low interest can take the form of people missing meetings, arriving late, not following through on agreed-upon items, and being compliant. What may once have been a high-functioning team drops to the low-functioning third quadrant in the matrix.

Q3 teams' biggest challenge: People give up on the team. It can be hard for you, as a team leader, to foster ownership and pride in a team that would just prefer not to meet. But the good news is these teams are ready for a fresh start, if you are willing and able to lead them.

Q4. Low Function, High Impact

- *Greatest asset: Competence and potential*
- *Greatest hurdle: Vulnerability-based trust and interdependence*

Quadrant 4 (Q4) teams, low function but high impact, are perhaps the most perplexing in that they don't function well as a group, but they do achieve results for students. People on Q4 teams are often happy to meet with their colleagues socially; however, they don't see much promise in learning with or from one another. When they do want to meet for professional reasons, it's more about collectively fixing something that is getting in the way of their doing what they already do, not examining and changing what they do. There is a strong level of independence that people on Q4 teams are accustomed to, which can make a shift toward interdependence challenging. Because, in isolation, they have an impact on students, members aren't typically convinced that there is a benefit to collaborating as a group. They see no reason, and certainly no urgency, to change what they are doing. (If they really are getting great outcomes for kids, you almost can't blame them for having reservations about changing. "If it ain't broke . . .") While their individual excellence might prove good for the classroom, it can cause dysfunction on a team. A research study showed "the greater the proportion of experts a team had, the more likely it was to disintegrate into nonproductive conflict or stalemate" (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Despite the outcomes they reach individually, Q4 teams often discover that when they do begin to address their function problems, their collective impact improves as well.

Q4 teams can resemble what the authors of *Team Genius* (Karlgaard & Malone, 2015) describe as “unhealthy, successful teams” (p. 241). Here are the characteristics exactly as they describe them in their book:

- A team that, despite its internal strife, just gets lucky
- A team that features so much talent that, despite itself, still manages to get across the finish line—though much less successfully than it might have otherwise
- A team that is composed of some top-quality members, and others who just played easy riders, but took a share of the credit
- A team that fakes results to look like it succeeded

The problem for Q4 teams is that they never reach their full potential (Karlgaard & Malone, 2015). Problems in student learning *do* exist; they are just not talked about openly and collectively, nor are they brushed off as someone else’s responsibility. While a Q4 team might have a few members who are a little more ego than impact, most are composed of people who genuinely care, are continuous learners with high standards, take pride in their accomplishments, and take ownership of the problems they see. They just prefer solving those problems alone. They are used to being solo “superheroes” who consistently make strides with students and find it easier to do what’s been working for them thus far. It’s not uncommon for one of those superheroes to be the team leader carrying the weight of the team.

The strength of a Q4 team is that students are learning. Their weakness is that educators are not. Q4 team members might exchange resources or recommendations with one another, or even look for solutions to problems outside of their zone of responsibility, but being vulnerable and reflecting publicly on their roles in student failure is not this group’s MO. Members are not invested in being a professional learning team. This translates into compliance or disengagement.

Q4 teams have a missed opportunity: The team does not reach their potential learning and wider impact. Members have expertise, but they don’t know how to work interdependently. They have not yet figured out how to hold on to their individuality, share their expertise, and continue doing what they do well while also being vulnerable and collectively learning with a group. For a Q4 team leader, it can be tough getting this group to meet and tougher getting this group to publicly expose real struggles in their teaching practice.

Six Key Points When Using the Team Function, Impact Matrix

1. **Don’t get hung up on labels.** I’ve presented the Team Function, Impact Matrix hundreds of times and find that most often principals, administrators, and teacher leaders who have context for it from reading my work, or taking my courses, or attending a workshop, really like the framework, but when they go

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to present it to teachers themselves, it gets mixed reactions. Without context, some teachers (not all) see it as another thing they need to do, or new language they now have to use. This is the *last* thing I want for them or you. Decide if showing the matrix or using language from it will help or hinder your team. The important takeaway is not that your colleagues know the difference between Q2 and Q3, but that your teams continuously reflect on two things: how well you work together *and* the impact of what you do together on student learning. (Note: While I make reference in this book to teams as low-functioning, low-impact Q3, etc., it is only to help distinguish characteristics between teams. In real life, I would *never* call or refer to a team by quadrant.)

2. **Teams might not be high or low, but somewhere in between.** View the matrix as a continuum with teams landing anywhere between high and low. It's common to have a moderately functioning team where they get along but are not always productive. Or, you might have a team that is getting results for some student populations but not for others, causing them to identify as moderately impactful.
3. **Your team has hidden strengths.** Teams that are low-functioning and/or low-impact still have many strengths. Drill down to specifics on the STL Meeting Reflection Tool (Figure 29, page 444) to help identify them. For instance, a team might struggle with coming to consensus on decisions (a sign of low function), but they are adept at designing well-run, purposeful meetings (an indicator of high function).
4. **The matrix is a tool for dialogue, not evaluation.** If using the matrix with your team to informally assess in which quadrant people perceive the team to "live," don't aim for consensus. Learning happens when people explain where they perceive their team falls on the matrix. If you so choose, you can even plot points on the matrix to see where people think a team is. But do not turn this process into an evaluation—it should only be used to inform a discussion about the team's strengths and areas for growth.)
5. **Teams can move in and out of any quadrant.** Teams are made up of people, and people can learn how to better function as a group and achieve greater impact. A low-functioning Q3 team, for example, can put organizational systems in place and become a high-functioning Q2 team. On the flip side, teams can also move away from Q1. For instance, a once high-functioning, high-impact Q1 team might gain new members who create friction in the group and cause the team to slip to the low-functioning, high-impact Q4.
6. **Even a Q1 team can have a low-functioning, low-impact meeting.** The matrix is best used to get a sense of how a team is doing over many meetings. *Overall, do we tend to live in Q1 or somewhere else?* But any team, regardless of self-placement on the matrix, can have a meeting that goes either well or poorly. If you lead a struggling team that experiences that

rare high-functioning, high-impact meeting, it can be a good sign that the team is on the verge of shifting quadrants! Debrief what you did so that you can do it again.

On the flip side, a high-functioning, high-impact Q1 team can have one meeting that is full of conflict and hurt feelings, where no intended outcomes are met. This might simply be viewed as one random bad meeting, but the leader and members to reflect on what happened so that the team doesn't slip into an undesirable quadrant with low function for the long term.

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