A Skillful Approach 1

This chapter outlines the key components of a skillful approach to overcoming hurdles to team learning for student achievement. It also provides valuable information to readers about the unique format and organization of this resource book.

A Note From One Team Leader to Another

Three weeks into my first year as a teacher, I am standing in the hallway at dismissal when the director of instruction gently approaches me and says, "Elisa, the principal wondered if you could lead your team's meeting?"

"Today?" I ask, slightly panicked that the meeting starts in fifteen minutes, and I have never led a team of adults before, let alone five colleagues with more experience than me.

He musters up his best smile and says, "For the year." He adds, "Just put a couple things down on paper as the agenda and try to get people to stick to it. You'll be fine."

My entrypoint into team leadership is what I call an instant coffee approach: Start with a group. Just add leader. And as you might imagine, this approach yielded as much richness as, well, instant coffee. I am so grateful to the first team of teachers that I led, but I would hardly call what I did leading learning for student achievement.

Since that fall day in 1995, I have had opportunities to develop my capacity to lead teams as a teacher, coach, consultant, and administrator. These experiences and my coaching of other team leaders in numerous districts have led me to appreciate the craftsmanship of leading a team of adults. This book comes from years of listening to team leaders' dilemmas and reflecting on my own. It comes from mulling over moments when my response succeeded in overcoming a hurdle to team learning or unintentionally created another. It comes from an ongoing quest for practical solutions grounded in theory and research. It comes from the belief that although hurdles can seem impossible to move past, they can in fact be catalysts for greater learning when we approach them skillfully.

A dear friend calls the content of this book "revolutionary common sense." If you lead a team and discover, like me, that the more you work to develop impactful professional learning, the more you need to learn, then I ask you to join me to revolutionize team leadership . . . and what better place to start than with our own common sense.

—Elisa

THE NEED FOR SKILLFUL TEAM LEADERSHIP

The well-intentioned advice from my administrator to write an agenda and try to stick to it does not begin to prepare a team leader for the complexity of leading colleagues in learning. Regardless of who is leading or being led, every team seeking to improve student achievement comes up against hurdles. These hurdles generate distinct dilemmas for a team leader.

For instance, a team leader might succeed in getting teachers to regularly look at student work together, but her team withholds critical feedback essential for learning and growth. This presents the team leader with the dilemma, *How do I facilitate rigorous discourse when we can't move beyond superficial talk* (Ch. 6)? Or a team leader may find she is able to foster rigorous discourse, but her team gets stuck at implementation in the classroom, leaving her to wonder, *How do I lead an action-oriented team when intentions don't align with actions* (Ch. 7)?

Team hurdles often crop up because of what is going on inside the team, but often outside factors contribute as well. School leadership, for example, can help or hinder a team's learning and impact on students. For instance, a team leader may be designated to lead a team, but when the principal is still making all of the team's learning decisions, the team leader is faced with the dilemma, *How do I foster shared leadership for learning when no one has authority to lead (including me)* (Ch. 4)? School culture can also contribute to the hurdles a team must overcome. For example, *When a "culture of alone together" exists, where people are grouped together but act alone, a team leader must find a way to bring people together to collaborate* (Ch. 3).

No matter how much experience a team leader has, she is likely to be confronted with team hurdles, creating a dilemma of what to do. What distinguishes the skillful team leader from a less-effective leader is her approach to overcome these hurdles. This approach is rooted in the leader's values, mindset, intelligence, and skill.

AN INTRODUCTION TO A SKILLFUL APPROACH: VALUES, MINDSET, INTELLIGENCE, SKILL

Values

Values provide guidance for the work teams do. They ground a team leader in what is important. They remind a team leader of what matters. When faced with hurdles to team learning the skillful team leader relies on her strong commitment to five foundational values[1]:

1. Collaboration

2. Shared leadership

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[1]These five values stem from the work of experts, namely, DuFour, Hord, and Fullan; leadership gurus Heifetz, Wagner, Kegan, and Lahey; and experts on organizational change, Argyris, Schein, and Senge.

3. Goal setting and attainment

4. Rigorous discourse

5. Continuous improvement

To anyone versed in professional learning community (PLC) literature, this list should sound familiar: in fact, perhaps so familiar that the meaning is watered down. The skillful team leader has an elevated, nuanced understanding of these five foundational values, and she fully commits to putting them into practice. A glimpse into what each value looks like follows. Each chapter in Part II of this book provides a more detailed understanding.

The skillful team leader values the following:

1. *Collaboration*. She believes learning together yields better results than does working alone. She is not satisfied with a group that meets regularly and calls itself a team when the members neither learn from one another nor advance student learning. She continuously assesses and advances her team's function (*how* they work interdependently) and impact on student learning (*what* they are working on and the outcomes achieved) (Ch. 3).

2. *Shared leadership*. He does not simply share leadership within his team by rotating roles of facilitator, notetaker, timekeeper, and the like. Instead, he insists that team members share the lead for each other's learning, including his own (Ch. 4).

3. *Goal setting and attainment*. She does not set and implement team goals out of compliance but works diligently with her team to attain impactful goals that deeply matter to teachers, students, and the school. Driven by purpose, the team leader advances her team through the inquiry cycle to achieve measured gains for students (Ch. 5).

4. *Rigorous discourse*. He does not settle for team discourse that promotes more of the same talk and practice, but he gently and purposefully prods his team to engage in evidence-based discourse that challenges cultural assumptions held by leaders, teachers, and students so that actionable knowledge is gained (Ch. 6).

5. *Continuous improvement*. She is not satisfied with team learning that doesn't result in replicable, long-lasting change (Ch. 7).

Mindset

What a teacher believes in his core about every student's capacity to learn impacts his effectiveness in the classroom. What a team leader believes in her core about every teacher's capacity to learn and improve impacts her effectiveness in leading a team. Carol Dweck's (2006) research (explained further in chapter 2) highlights the distinctions between fixed and growth mindsets and the impact each has on an individual's effort and success. Applied to leadership, the skillful team leader approaches hurdles from a growth mindset with a belief that every student and every teacher can improve as can her own ability to lead

them. Being able to recognize both a teacher's mindset and one's own is a necessary skill for any team leader to facilitate ongoing learning. Being able to *influence* mindset brings about desired change (Chapter 2 explores the roles mindset and adult development play in team learning).

Intelligence

The intelligence with which the skillful team leader approaches her work is not IQ but EQ, emotional intelligence. A term coined by Daniel Goleman (2002), *emotional intelligence* is one's ability to be attuned to and respond to emotions in self and others. Skillful team leaders access "a potent emotional guidance system that keeps what they say and do on track. . . . They listen carefully, picking up on what people are truly concerned about, and they respond on the mark" (p. 50). Jack London's (1916) description of surfing in his short story, "The Kanaka Surf," seems a perfect metaphor for the emotional intelligence the skillful team leader exhibits. He wrote that "[It] requires wisdom of waves, timing of waves, and a trained deftness in entering such unstable depths of water with pretty, unapprehensive, head-first cleavage, while at the same time making the shallowest possible of dives" (para. 39). Like the surfer, the skillful team leader possesses wisdom, timing, and deftness as she navigates the hurdle-filled waters of leading a team. She is highly attuned to the emotions of the group and is aware of how her own emotional response can impact others. She manages these emotions with skill.

Skill

A skillful approach to overcoming hurdles to professional learning for student achievement requires a team leader to anchor her leadership in the five foundational values, to hold the mindset that every teacher has the capacity to learn and change, and to read and respond effectively to the emotional climate that a hurdle creates. Executing this approach requires skill. The skillful team leader is able to do the following.

Identify the hurdle. Like pausing a movie at a critical point, the skillful team leader has the keen ability to detect a hurdle when it is almost unnoticeable to anyone else on the team. He recognizes when a team encounters an obstacle to learning and consciously proceeds to uncover where it is coming from.

Explore possible causes. The skillful team leader does not react to a hurdle but instead thoughtfully analyzes it as if looking through a telephoto lens of a digital video camera. She is able to zoom in to causes found at the team level and then zoom out to see causes posed by her own leadership and the school.

Respond. After careful analysis of possible contributing factors to the hurdle, the skillful team leader thoughtfully considers her options for response. She not only decides which responses to use but also when to use them. She makes use of four types of responses:

- *Proactive response.* What the team leader says and does can often prevent the team from coming up against the hurdle in the first place. For example, one of many proactive responses suggested throughout each chapter is

"norming," also known as crafting a group agreement. Chapter 3 recommends that teams norm not only for how a team functions (e.g., We will agree to disagree) but also for the team's impact on teacher and student learning (e.g., We will invite others to question our assumptions, beliefs, and values).

- *In-the-moment response.* The skillful team leader makes the decision to respond to what is happening as it is happening. For example, one strategy offered in multiple chapters is to *"find an entry point."* This response requires the team leader to listen keenly to team members, sifting through the conversation to pull out a key thought, idea, or concern that needs to be explored further.

- *Follow-up response.* The skillful team leader's words and actions after a meeting assures the team is able to sustain gains made without creating another hurdle to learning. For instance, several chapters reference the *"check-in"* strategy, when a team assesses how well they function and the impact they have on student learning.

- *School leadership team response.* The skillful team leader mobilizes others, particularly the principal and administrators, in helping her team move beyond a given hurdle. Finding solutions to team dilemmas is not a one person job, and often if one team encounters hurdles, others will too. Tony Wagner et al. (2006) suggest districts form "leadership practice communities" where leaders commit to "helping one another solve problems of practice related to the school's teaching and learning challenges together" (p. 17). This type of learning leadership team is also beneficial at the school level. One strategy suggested throughout the book for school leadership teams is to *"model."* The team leader together with other school leaders demonstrate the desired team behavior in their own leadership team meetings, which is sometimes easier said than done.

Consider school culture. The skillful team leader views hurdles as obstacles to overcome but also as windows into the complex world of school culture. Often described as "the way we do things around here," school culture is chock-full of beliefs, values, customs, and traditions that suggest how people have interacted in the past and are the basis for how they interact in the present (and likely will in the future unless deep-rooted change is made). Schools that don't address the deeper cultural issues at hand only go through the motions of being a PLC, and they will struggle to achieve *sustainable* student improvement (Fullan, 2009). The skillful team leader knows that addressing a problem specific to her team without a deep look at how school culture contributes will only give rise to the hurdle again. For a team leader, this means considering not only causes from within the team but also looking for signs of a "gap" in school culture. Based on Edgar H. Schein's work, this culture gap is when an espoused value doesn't align with visible evidence in the organization (as cited in Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, pp. 268–269). The school may have a healthy culture otherwise, but a gap creates a hurdle that teams have trouble moving past.

For example, the team leader faced with the dilemma, *How do I facilitate rigorous discourse when my team can't move beyond superficial talk* (Ch. 6), might

attribute the problem to a team's discomfort with using a "looking at student work" protocol. But she must also question if the *culture of nice*—where educators censor what they say because open, honest discourse is discouraged throughout the school—is negatively impacting the team's ability to speak candidly (MacDonald, 2011).

Teams who are content to be pockets of success in a system where school culture gaps go unaddressed find themselves struggling to sustain the positive impact they have. It's as if the team is working hard to knit a beautiful sweater while someone is on the other end unraveling the yarn. The skillful team leader not only works with her team to navigate around the hurdles that school culture gaps cause, but also works to close those gaps so all teams can succeed.

Closing school culture gaps is not easy. People are often "deeply invested (sometimes even just by habit and not ideology) in preserving the rhythms and practices in place" (Pappano, 2010, p. 9). Others hold so tightly to assumptions about student and adult learning that it is difficult to get them to even listen to different perspectives, let alone be influenced by them. Beliefs so strongly shape the policies, procedures, and everyday life of individuals in a school, even when leaders and teachers leave, their beliefs stick around (Schein, 1985/1992). It's particularly difficult to close a gap in an otherwise healthy school culture when no one talks about it publicly. But the skillful team leader notices when a gap exists between what a school says it values and what it practices. She is not only able to navigate around hurdles created by a gap in school culture, but also able to lead her team to positively influence the school culture.

As team leaders master the skills—identify the hurdle, recognize possible causes, respond, and consider culture—they are able to have a greater impact on professional learning, which results in student achievement.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION REGARDING THE WRITING AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is divided into two parts:

> Part I: *Foundations* provides the reader with a skillful approach to leading teams of adult learners for student achievement. Chapter 1 provides an overview of a skillful approach: values, mindset, intelligence, skill. Chapter 2 delves deeper into the role of mindset in team learning.

> Part II: *Hurdles* consists of five chapters, each named for a substantial hurdle that teams encounter when putting one of the five foundational values into practice: collaboration, shared leadership, goal setting and attainment, rigorous discourse, and continuous improvement. Each chapter follows a consistent format as outlined in the following:

> *What Is (the Foundational Value), and Why Is It Important?* Defines the foundational value in focus, specifically what it is and the literature that speaks to the benefits of effectively putting that value into practice.

Hurdles to (Putting Foundational Value Into Practice). Names the hurdles a team might encounter and three to five increasingly complex dilemma questions[2] that arise for a team leader as a result of the hurdles.

Dilemma. Zooms in to one dilemma question presented in the previous section.

Snapshot. One or two paragraphs (shown in *italics*) frame the dilemma followed by a snapshot of a hypothetical team experiencing it. Snapshots are intended to be relatable, concise, and nonjudgmental. They illustrate a specific problem while still having a broad enough application to the reader's own specific issues. All snapshots are intended to resonate with the reader and are garnered from a collection of real experiences, but none are retellings of actual events. They may sound familiar because the hurdles to team learning are universal (In fact, I have had some team leaders read them and say, "This just happened to our team last week."), but the actual team members described are fictional.

It is also important to note that each hypothetical snapshot is just that—a snapshot in time. I intentionally write about one small moment in a team's work together, like a snapshot captured on film, for the purpose of demonstrating a specific dilemma. The snapshot does not define the team. In other words, teachers who show reluctance in one snapshot are not to be labeled resistant, a struggling team leader is not to be thought of as inept, and a team is not to be branded dysfunctional. Even the most consistently high-functioning, high-impact teams (explained in detail in Ch. 3) come up against hurdles to learning and achievement.

Identify the Hurdle. Specifies the hurdle to team learning encountered in the sample snapshot of a team.

Explore Possible Causes. Considers a wide array of possible causes for the hurdle.

Respond. Provides the team leader with field-tested, proactive, in-the-moment, follow-up, and school leadership team responses.

Consider School Culture. Assumes that school culture is generally healthy but can have a gap that might contribute to the team hurdle (e.g., a "culture acidic to change," Ch. 7). Readers learn recognizable indicators that a gap exists, and they take away suggestions on how a team, together with others, can help shape the school culture to its' healthiest state so team learning can thrive.

Application to Your Own Practice: Connect, Observe, Explore, Act. Each chapter concludes with an action-planning tool to apply the learning from the chapter to the readers' own team(s). This section is particularly useful if a school team or cohort of team leaders is reading and discussing a chapter. It is also useful for those leading a course on team leadership to foster reflective thinking and action.

Note: Resources that a team leader may find useful can be found at the end of the book.

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[2] I address dilemmas that have been most frequently asked by the hundreds of team leaders with whom I have worked and that have no simple answers. This book does not answer basic questions such as "How do I find time for my team to meet?" Dilemma questions within each chapter are designed to grow increasingly more complex, so the reader can turn to the level of complexity as needed.

This book is intended for formal and informal leaders who facilitate professional learning in teams. Team leaders may be responsible for or may be in training to lead any type of learning team such as district K–12, school-based instructional leadership, departmental, grade level, data, study groups, and inquiry groups. Although the term "team leader" is used in the singular throughout this book, it is understood that some teams rotate the role or have coleaders. This book can be valuable to whoever is holding the role for any duration of time.

Program directors, staff developers, and professors who provide instruction and training to team leaders may also find this book useful in a course or book study.

This book is intentionally designed as a resource. When picking up a professional text for the first time, I tend to do a brisk read cover-to-cover to get the lay of the land and then sit it prominently on my shelf, pages dog-eared, sticky notes protruding so that I can go back to particular sections as needed in my work. Consequently, I have designed this book for that purpose. This book is easy to read, written in a consistent format so that team leaders can read it from start to finish or select chapters that speak to the current hurdles they are encountering. Both the chapters and the dilemmas posed as questions within each chapter build on prior ones but also stand well on their own. In this way, a team leader can reference relevant sections as needed, and she can even share portions of the text with her team or colleagues in a course.

This book is not a manual. It provides numerous possible causes for the hurdles described in each chapter, as well as a variety of effective responses for a team leader to consider. It is not intended as an "if this happens, say or do this" type of book. It requires the reader to tap into her own emotional intelligence, to read the waves of her team and school culture, and thoughtfully and selectively use this book as a resource to work through her own team dilemmas.

The title of this book is a tribute to the teachers and team leaders with whom I have worked alongside and coached, who remind me that leading teams requires skillfulness that we can and must continuously develop in order to foster learning for teachers and students. It is also a reverent nod to Jon Saphier, who founded the nonprofit *Teachers*[21] for whom I have consulted for fifteen years and who authored *The Skillful Teacher*, which has had a tremendous impact on my own teaching and that of my colleagues.

Why a Whole Book About Hurdles?

When writing this book, I toyed with a number of words before committing to *hurdles*. *Roadblocks* was a consideration, but the word sounded too impassable—like the closed street by my house that crews have been working on for months. *Obstacles* was a contender but made me think of cones I used to have to run around as a teenager on field day—seems more like an inconvenience than the angst I feel when I'm face-to-face with a hurdle. And the word *problems* seemed too depressing. I settled on *hurdles* because of the

onomatopoeia—the word sounds as huge and intimidating as the actual thing—and because I have this inspiring image in my head of the team leader as a runner, leaping over one hurdle after another. Sometimes the race is a sprint, and the runner makes it through speedily and unharmed. Other times, it's the long hurdle race where it just seems like as soon as she gets over one hurdle another is waiting, and another, and another. Regardless of the height of the hurdle or how many are in the runner's path, the only way to get beyond them is to run toward them. This is frightening. Seeing the hurdles that lie ahead can make her want to quit. But the more she runs the course, the more she learns to anticipate what is coming and, more important, how to respond. Once the runner makes the leap, she is encouraged.

Hurdles to professional learning for student achievement come from people we care about, cultures we are proud to work within, and oftentimes from ourselves. A skillful approach can help us make the leap.