BUILDING AND LEADING TEAMS: PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE AMONG TEAM MEMBERS
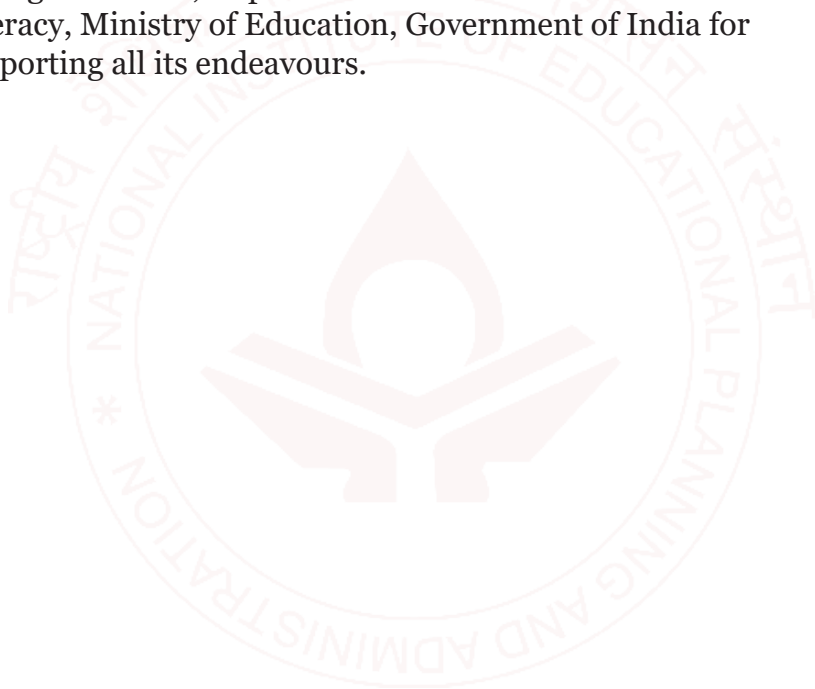
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BUILDING AND LEADING TEAMS: PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE AMONG TEAM MEMBERS

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Introduction

A school as an organization is constituent of many stakeholders, prominent among them being the school leader, teachers, students, parents, and the community. In the context of team building, however, we consider stakeholders within the school boundary as the primary members of the team. If need demands, school teams can seek active participation of community members. However, when we consider the constitution of school teams, usually stakeholders operate within school boundaries. A school leader cannot do everything alone, she/he requires the support of everyone to ensure smooth functioning of the school as well as to achieve the vision collaboratively. The main purpose of the school is to ensure student learning and achievement of student learning outcomes. In this endeavor, school teams can be constituted along many lines. Teams can be of various types, some teams are theme-based, such as school teams appointed for scholarship distribution, student examinations, annual functions, etc. Some teams can be temporary for three to five months or a few can continue for the entire academic year. Building and leading teams is a challenging task for school leaders, however, the most important challenge is to sustain the functioning of team processes. One of the important techniques of facilitating team processes is creating spaces for professional dialogue among team members and ensuring that dialogue and meaningful discussions contribute to team purpose and achievement of outcomes.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of the module, school leaders will be able to

- Understand the meaning of building and leading professional teams aligned to a vision
- Understand the concept of professional dialogue among team members
- Gain insights on how to lead professional dialogue through effective and ethical communication

Sections	Topic
Section 1	What are professional teams in the context of school?
Section 2	Professional dialogue in teamwork
Section 3	Effective and Ethical Communication as a key to lead Professional dialogue

SECTION 1
WHAT ARE PROFESSIONAL TEAMS IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL?

Learning Objective: School heads will be able to understand the concept of teams and differentiate it from groups from the perspective of team building

Key Words: Teams; Groups; types of teams

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Introduction

In simple terms, we can understand the term 'professional team' as a group of individuals with unique characteristics such as talents, knowledge, experience, information, and other attributes working for a certain goal or a larger vision and in the process complimenting each other's strengths and weaknesses. Teams are generally seen as different from groups in terms of interdependence, structure, and time span. In this sense, all teams are groups where groups are seen as sharing a common social categorization and identity, but not all groups are teams since a team has characteristics that are aligned with a vision, goal setting, and achieving outcomes. Therefore, an important differentiation between a group and a team is that a group often comes together to work in an unplanned fashion, with less defined roles, and a structure that is temporary with no long-term implications, whereas, a team is organized and led with clearly defined goals and clarity in roles of team members.

In a school, one can think of different types of teams that need to be managed by school leaders. These are explained as follows-

a) Cross-Functional Team

A cross-functional team includes members from across different functional areas of the school like teachers of different subjects. Members of this type of team belong to different functional backgrounds, education, and experience which may be the strength of the team in terms of generating innovative ideas, problem-solving and decision making. But at the same time, the inclusion of strong personalities may lead to disagreements. Hence, to foster social cohesion in such types of teams and to generate a system of accountability, there is a need for a strong leader with specific targets.

b) Virtual Teams

The recent pandemic has created multiple opportunities for virtual interactions. Schools have switched over to online teaching-learning processes. For communicating in such an environment, a virtual team plays a vital role in schools as well. Such teams include a set of individuals working together with a common purpose but from different schools located nearby or farther away. One of the biggest advantages associated with virtual teams is the flexibility of time for members and other obvious benefits such as low cost, both in terms of time and money. However, leadership attributes such as motivation, commitment, and aligning with purpose are required by a leader to monitor such types of teams working in an online mode.

c) Self-Managing Teams

Self-managing teams have greater ownership of the task they perform because of the presence of autonomy among team members. In such types of teams, team members are responsible and accountable for all or most aspects of the task. They also carry out supporting tasks as well, such as planning and scheduling of tasks. Some of the charateristics associated with self-managed teams are that team members share accountability for what they accomplish, individuals have a greater commitment to the task because they are directly responsible for its results, and they take on some of a leaders' work so that he/she can continue with other tasks. To make a team effective, team members must have the skills to interact effectively with other team members and for this, they must know each other's strengths and areas of improvement. Apart from that, they must also be aware of different roles and tasks within a team to coordinate the tasks efficiently.

Steps to building effective teams

1. Identifying correct people in alignment with the purpose of a team.
2. Arriving at the role of each person mutually through discussion. These roles must be clear to each and align with the team's purpose.
3. Creating open channels of communication among team members; team members and the team leader; team members and the school leader (if the leader is not the team leader).
4. Sustaining team interactions around a purpose so that teamwork can progress in alignment.
5. Ensuring team outcomes are in line with the team purpose.

Significance of Professional Dialogue in TeamWork

While all the above steps are equally important, it is usually observed that team interactions fizzle out after the initial euphoria. Team interactions are most important to capture the imagination of team members, keep them motivated, and align every day with the team purpose. Meaningful team interactions either led by the team leader or a combination of team leader and team members can create a conducive environment for the team to flourish and contribute to team effectiveness. This is possible only when team leaders and teams encourage professional dialogue among themselves.

What do we mean by **professional dialogue** in the context of the school?

* Continuous dialogue
* Collaborative talk with mutual respect and trust
* Dialogue on professional issues
* Topics/themes that are school-related
* Academic discussions
* Discussions around concerns of transactional processes, learning-teaching processes, or student learning

* Dialogue on issues related to the professional development of team members, exchange of ideas with teammates of neighboring schools, or through online medium

* Any other professional matter that has a direct bearing on the mental health of team members related to their performance in teams and impacting team outcomes

Let us sum up

This section of the module discussed the concept of professional teams and their different types. In addition, it also explained the significance of professional dialogues for making teams effective and enhancing performance.

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SECTION 2

PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE IN TEAM WORK

Learning Objective: School heads are able to recognize the significance of professional dialogues in team work

Key Words: Professional dialogue, Teamwork, Team learning

Introduction

Teams become progressively widespread within school settings to interact, manage, and carry out challenging tasks by pooling in knowledge and skills of team members. Undoubtedly, collective resources always outperform individuals working separately but working in teams automatically does not yield team performance. Sometimes, it may happen that due to over-commitment to goals, overdependence on a dominant leader, or lack of distribution of responsibility, most members may fail to express their true feelings. As a result, teams may fail to use their complete potential or consider teamwork time-consuming or too demanding. Hence, continuous dialogue, doubt-clearance and team learning are significant to steer the team in a productive direction. Unless teams learn, institutions cannot learn. Team learning bears the potential for improving learning outcomes with quality and a higher level of social acceptance.

Professional Dialogue: Typology

Teams can learn through meaningful professional conversations among team members that may be termed as professional dialogues. Conversation and dialogue are practiced in different formats in schools. A *discussion conversation* is a way of conversing about issues and encouraging participant teachers to share their feelings and ideas, while a *dialogue conversation* occurs when people become aware of others' assumptions, reflect upon each other's assumptions, and converse meaningfully. Leading conversation is a process where leaders facilitate and sustain conversations so that participants can make sense of their experiences. *Professional dialogue* among school leaders and teachers leads to everyone gaining multiple perspectives on problem-solving and on issues of concern. Professional dialogue is crucial for both school leaders and teachers because it is embedded in the complex nature of leadership and

teaching and can reflect important assumptions about teaching and explore the nature of student learning. Moreover, dialogue is like professionalism because it fosters teachers' professional learning. Teachers share their concerns and problems and they receive feedback from other teachers. Furthermore, teachers can construct their professional identity through talking with other colleagues.

Professional dialogue

Is also known as 'inquiry conversation', 'reflective conversation', 'learning conversation' or 'professional or collegial discussion' is "a discussion between peers that allows the other to explicitly articulate, appreciate and extend their understanding of practice" (Nsibande, 2007, p. 4). It is widely recognized that professional dialogue allows teachers to grow professionally. In its absence, learning is typically slower. Professional dialogue makes possible "the learning of new knowledge, questions and practices and, at the same time, the unlearning of some long-held and often difficult to uproot ideas, beliefs, and practices" (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 9). Peer-to-peer exchange is an essential characteristic of professional dialogue and can enhance transformative learning. Some of the related terms are discussed below -

"Professional conversations" in terms of teaching and learning can be defined as: "formal and informal dialogue that occurs between education professionals including teachers, mentors, coaches, and school leaders and is focused on educational matters"(Timperley, 2015).

"Learning conversations" tend to be those where new knowledge or understandings are generated which are then translated into teaching practice. This can be defined as "a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue that supports teachers to reflect on their practice. As a result, the teacher gains new knowledge and uses it to improve his or her teaching. Learning conversations as a form of professional learning can be

defined as: "...how educators make meaning together and jointly come up with new insights and knowledge. These conversations lead to intentional change to enhance practice and pupil learning".

"Professional learning conversations" is a term that can be described as a particular form of evidence-informed conversation:" it includes more than conversations with some attention to evidence. Instead, it is an iterative process of asking questions, examining evidence, and thinking about what the evidence means in the particular context". Hence, three qualities are required for these kinds of conversations: having an inquiry habit of mind, using relevant data, and relationships of respect and challenge.

Different types of professional dialogue act as a functional element in enhancing school change and developing a team's personal and professional knowledge landscapes, but for this, it is important to understand

- What do teams talk about?

- How do they talk about it?

- How do such professional conversations impact team learning?

5Cs of Successful Professional Dialogue

Figure 1: 5Cs of Successful Professional Dialogue

Exercise 1

Check these 5C's of Professional Dialogue in the context of your school teams that would be helpful for you as a leader for building strong and effective teams

- **Be a communicator:** Are your school's vision communicated well enough to use in a professional conversation?

- **Be clear:** Is your feedback clear enough for other team members to take action?

- **Be consistent:** Is your feedback specific, gentle, two-way and ongoing?

- **Be collegial:** Does your feedback communicate that you are on the team member's side no matter what you are saying?

- **Be caring:** Do your words and actions reveal attention and care for the team members in your school?

Let us sum up

In this section, we learned about different types of Professional Dialogue, to make teams more effective and enhance the performance of individual team members. Therefore, it can be said that without professional conversation, teams might be able to change but not learn to complete their tasks effectively.

SECTION 3

EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL COMMUNICATION AS A KEY TO LEAD PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Learning Objectives: Help school heads in developing effective and ethical communication skills to lead professional dialogue.
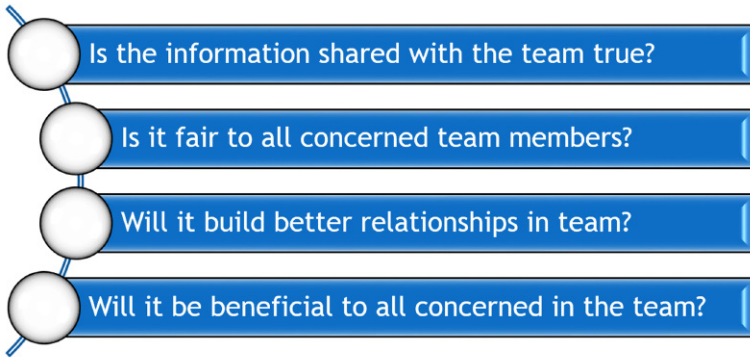
Key Words: Ethical Communication, listening, Unbiased

Effective and Ethical Communication

As we all know, professional dialogue is a learning conversation between school professionals, therefore from this point of view, "communication" becomes one of the key skills that a leader and his/her team must be proficient in. Communication involves more than just the exchange of a few isolated words. There are many factors that influence how we must communicate in a team. One of the most important components of communication is the intention and approach a communicator uses. As speakers, we have certain responsibilities when we share something or we present our ideas and discuss with others. These can be understood as both written and unwritten standards of behavior codified as ***communication ethics***. These ethics become the basis of professional conversation.

While "ethical communication" has no one clear definition, there are many key concepts that both speakers and listeners must follow when communication occurs. When we discuss "ethics" in communication, we deal with values such as professionalism, care, honesty, fairness, active listening, responsible use of words and so on. To consider communication ethics, individuals and groups need to evaluate their professional dialogues each day.

The following is a 4-way test for ethical communication in a team during a professional conversation:

Is the information shared with the team true?

Is it fair to all concerned team members?

Will it build better relationships in team?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned in the team?

By applying this four-way test, leaders become more responsible communicators when they present, share and listen to information with the team. Effective and ethical communication is bedrock for success of team processes in any learning organization. While communicating factually accurate messages, honesty and transparency are central to ethical communication.

Some of the fundamentals of ethical communication are:

• **Be Transparent and Honest**

Being transparent in professional dialogue means establishing truthful representation. Leaders must disclose all relevant details to the team including norms. It is important that leader does not change the narrative based on what individuals believe unless, there is a consensus. Being honest means communicating what is known to be true, to a listener, with no intent to deceive or present only parts of the truth. Hence, ethical communication must be based on accurate information and facts.

- **Active Listening**

Dialogue is at the basis of all effective human transactions in a school organization. The leadership skill of active listening is at the core of dialogue and meaning making. In learning conversations, hearing someone and listening actively are two different things. To sustain effective communication during a professional dialogue, it is essential for team leaders and team members to pro-actively listen to each other and not just hear what they want to hear or hear only parts of the discussion. Some of the attributes of active listening are paying attention; asking questions when any point is not completely understood for sake of clarification and clear understanding; responding appropriately; deferring judgement until all sides are listened to and analysed.

- **Speak Non-Judgmentally/Unbiased**

In professional conversation, ethical and concise communication implies thinking and speaking in a non-judgmental manner with every team member, negating unnecessary conflict, which typically creates a breakdown in communication and causes misunderstandings. Unnecessary conflict is never good for any situation, and such conflicts usually result from unethical communications, judgmental, accusatory and overly critical comments. These often become the catalyst for such breakdowns in communication.

- **Speak From Your Own Experience**

Bringing your personal and professional experiences into a dialogue with team members is vital. These experiences will help you substantiate your arguments with tangible examples and make your communication more effective. A professional dialogue can thus involve sharing of experiences and anecdotes to support leadership and teaching practice. These experiences also help in professional development of team members.

- **Strive To Understand**

During a professional dialogue, it is essential that one is proactive while listening to the other. It is equally important for team members to strive to fully understand what is being said before responding. While asking for confirmation if a statement is correct, it is better to ask questions and clarify so that the issue is understood. Once understood, listeners must think about what has been said, reflect and then construct a reply. Reading "in between the lines" is also a significant skill of a team leader/member that enables for understanding of what is not said, but that which is implied.

- **Respect Privacy and Confidentiality**

When conversing in a team, it is important to ensure that one is not violating any individual's privacy or disclosing confidential information regarding any team member. This positive habit will have a wide range of implications, including building of trust, creation of a fear free work culture, focus on productive work, minimizing gossip and mitigating toxic conversations about personal lives of any team member.

- **Accept Responsibility**

A core feature within any ethical communication framework is taking responsibility for actions that result from one's words, behaviours, actions and outcomes. This can have both short-term and long-term consequences. Hence, as a leader one must communicate freely but with enough caution. If there are any consequences, the correct leadership attribute would be to take onus or responsibility of one's words or actions. Thus, accepting one's responsibility is part of the framework of ethical communication.

Based on the above fundamentals of ethical communication two activities have been designed. Please reflect on these.

Activity 1

Ethical Communication with Stakeholders

In schools as learning organizations, communicating concisely, ethically and appropriately is necessary so that school processes can operate effectively. Schools are places where individuals work together. One of the parameters of effective school functioning is how individuals communicate with each other. These interactions vary from being informal to formal/professional. During a single day there are hundreds of different interactions between the school head and stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents, community members etc.

Recount a professional dialogue with a teacher/team of teachers that you had recently. Analyse if there were instances during the conversation (s), where ethical communication was not maintained. Note the instances and reflect upon them.

Reflective Questions

1. What were the highlights of the conversation?
2. Do you think norms of ethical communication were maintained during the interactions?
3. What aspects of ethical communication were missed out during the conversation?
4. How could you as a school leader improve the interactions with the teacher/between team members, in the above instance?

Activity 2
Active listening

School Leaders are generally busy in their roles and responsibilities. At times, they are so keen to get tasks done that they forget that people are more important than tasks and that tasks do not get done without people. If leaders are active around the school there are more opportunities to talk with students, teachers, parents and the community. Where this is not enough, leaders must take out time for proper conversation. An important skill is active listening. This means that the listener is engaged actively in the process of listening. Listeners can do this in many ways such as being attentive, nodding, agreeing, making brief comments, leaning forward, checking out information, asking open-ended questions and summarising.

To Do

- Create a checklist on characteristics of active listening through discussion with staff members.

- School leader and team members/teachers can practice active listening with this ready reckoner.

- After a few days share experiences with everyone during a staff meeting/team process on active listening as a practice and how it has improved the quality of dialogues among team members.

- Add new characteristics to active listening after discussion.

Let us sum up

Effective and ethical communication is at the heart of professional conversations for trust building, improving inter-personal relations and team effectiveness. Professional dialogues if conducted in a warm and trustworthy space can improve school processes and outcomes drastically.

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Assessment: Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

Q1. Which of the following is not a characteristic of a successful team?

    a. Appropriate Leadership

    b. Balanced Participation

    c. Cohesiveness

    d. Mutual Enmity

Q2. The process that enables a group to work effectively and collaboratively towards a common goal is

    a. Team building

    b. Leadership

    c. Interests

    d. Skills

Q3. Which of these does not define professional dialogue?

    a. Improving professional practice

    b. Monologue

    c. Sharing knowledge and skills with peers

    d. Academic discussions

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Q4. A core feature within any ....framework is taking responsibility for the actions that result from one's words or actions, whether correct or incorrect.

   a. Positive Feedback

   b. Ethical communication

   c. Negative Feedback

   d. Constructive Feedback

Q5. Active listening does not include

   a. Asking open-ended questions

   b. Making notes while listening

   c. Overhearning someone

   d. Making eye contact

Ans- Q1.-d, Q2.-a, Q3.-b, Q4.-b, Q5.-c

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