

Cover Sheet

Article Title: Let's Sync, Not Sink! Paddling Together Through Rough Waters

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Let's Sync, Not Sink! Paddling Together Through Rough Waters

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This past summer my family went on a backcountry canoeing trip in Yellowstone National Park. During the first morning we covered several miles and enjoyed calm water and smooth paddling. It was picturesque, pleasant, and about as ideal as we could have hoped. By late morning, though, the winds had picked up and we found ourselves rowing into a headwind and cutting through large waves. We each began paddling faster and harder. Despite our increased efforts, we made little progress and began to worry about our own safety. As we crossed a particularly treacherous section of water in a large bay, we noticed that one of the canoes was making much faster progress than the others. My dad and teenage daughter arrived in their canoe on the other side of the bay about fifteen minutes earlier than the rest of us. It didn't look like they were paddling any harder than we were. Did they have a better canoe? Were they a lot stronger? Did they have less weight in their boat? When, in a state of exhaustion, we finally made it to the other side of the bay, we asked my dad and daughter their secret. Their simple answer was a lifesaver to all of us for the remainder of the trip, especially since the winds and waves only intensified throughout the week: "Get into a consistent rhythm and paddle together!"

Interestingly, our journey as educators over the last year has been somewhat similar to my family's vacation. We may have started the 2019-2020 school year gliding along with fairly ideal conditions, making great progress, and enjoying the journey. As the winds and waves of COVID-19 blew in during early 2020, we were all required to increase our efforts, hoping that things would soon return to relative calm. Unfortunately, the winds of this pandemic have only intensified, and many of us are exhausted and feel like we're making very slow progress. While these conditions have required immense effort from every educator at every school, some teachers, teams, and schools seem to be making much more progress than others. Though seemingly obvious, the advice to paddle together in sync seems to be at the core of successful schools during calm times, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In consulting with many educators over the last year, I have observed that the schools that seem to be struggling the most are those that have not found a consistent rhythm of paddling together:

- "All of us on our collaborative teacher team have been so busy keeping our heads above water we only meet sporadically. We're just in survival mode and don't have time to meet together."
- "Our school intervention team was meeting regularly and making a lot of progress until the pandemic hit. We haven't really met much since then, and I fear students are falling through the cracks."
- "As a principal I've been so swamped with social distancing, contact tracing, and other COVID stuff, I haven't had time to consistently meet with my teacher leadership team. I know they're stressed, and I don't want to add one more thing to their plates by holding meetings. Maybe we'll meet more when things calm down."

- “Before the pandemic I really relied heavily on consistent collaboration with other administrators. Most principal collaboration meetings have been cancelled, and when we do have meetings, they’re all about COVID. I’m exhausted and feel like I’m on my own.”

On the flip side, schools that continue to make progress through these stormy times are characterized by comments indicating a consistent, rhythmic paddling:

- “As a collaborative teacher team we have relied on each other more than ever. I would not be able to survive teaching during this pandemic without the consistent support of my team. We cannot afford not to meet!”
- “Our students are in more need than ever. Though we’ve had to be creative with schedules and meeting formats, our school intervention team has met more consistently and depended on our collective expertise even more than in the past.”
- “All of the challenges we have faced as a school are way beyond my own abilities as a principal or even the abilities of my small administrative team. Consistent collaboration with my teacher leadership team has been a lifesaver. I have been amazed at the innovative and courageous solutions that I never would have come up with on my own. The school leadership team has been indispensable!”
- “Our district has been so supportive throughout this pandemic by facilitating ongoing opportunities to problem solve and brainstorm with other administrators on how to continue leading learning. While we definitely have had a lot of COVID training and meetings, the district has really helped us stay focused on learning.”

Working together in a synched rhythm has some stellar benefits when facing a crisis. One Oxford study found that rowers could handle “elevated pain thresholds when people rowed together but less elevated ones when individuals rowed alone” (Pink 2018, p.). Facing challenging times with a cohesive team actually helps us see challenges as more manageable. “If you look at a hill while standing next to someone you consider to be a friend, the hill looks 10 to 20 percent less steep than if you were facing that hill alone” (Achor, 2018, p. 31). As educators we’ve been working for the last two decades to consistently bring people together for powerful collaboration, and most of us have found tremendous value in this; unfortunately, this pandemic has, in a matter of months, undone two decades of work in some schools, resulting in some of us retreating to old and ineffective habits of isolation, and we know that “isolation is the enemy of improvement” (Elmore, 2004, p. 67).

We need each other now more than ever. “When facing changing, turbulent, or novel times—calling for novel solutions—multiple heads can be better than one” (Grenny et al., 2013, p. 203), and “a team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 17). Casey Reason highlights the benefits of paddling together as a school: “How much greater could your school be if you not only unlocked the great individual learning capacities of staff members but also harnessed the potential that’s available when those forces combine” (2014, p. 92)? Surely paddling together in sync is the only way we can successfully navigate the stormy waters we face. Here are a few ways we can more effectively paddle together as educators.

Focus on Learning as a Compelling Shared Destination

In the midst of our frantic paddling, it can be motivating to be reminded of our compelling destination of deep student learning. Recently, many of the traditional and tangible measures of learning (academic achievement, attendance, graduation rates, etc.) have been somewhat compromised. Rather than feel frustrated, we could seize this unique opportunity to reimagine our goals, processes, and systems to focus on some less tangible, and possibly more compelling learning destinations. Rather than making survival until the pandemic is over our primary destination only to return the status quo, perhaps our revised destination ought to focus on helping students and teachers learn how as citizens of character we can thrive amidst difficulty through collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. That is a compelling cause we can all get behind, and probably why most of us became educators. Truly we as “humans are wired to seek meaning in everything we do, whether we’re sitting in an office, hiking in the mountains, or eating dinner with the family. Passion for a cause fuels energy, intelligence, and creativity” (McKee, 2017, p. 7). Have we taken time amidst the frantic paddling to be reminded of our compelling why, rekindle our passion, and ensure we’re paddling in the same direction? Patterson et al. advise, “If you interrupt your impulses by connecting with your goals during crucial moments, you can greatly improve your chances of success” (Patterson, et al., 2012, p. 16). As we seize upon this unique opportunity to re-examine and refocus on the most important types of learning, we will all feel a renewed sense of passion and purpose that will provide needed motivation to keep paddling together through the winds and waves that face us.

Clear Signaling & Swing

Once we get clear on our destination, we need to send clear and consistent signals, providing a “cadence of accountability” that will synchronize everyone’s collective efforts (McChesney et al., 2012). Indeed, “Alex Pentland at MIT “has shown that the more cohesive and communicative a team is...the more they get done.” (Pink, 2018, p. 191). While this cohesion and communication require everyone’s efforts, they do not happen without the leader providing a clear, inviting signal. In Yellowstone, my dad sent clear signals to my daughter in the form of a peppy sea shanty. She soon joined her voice and paddling efforts with his and they experienced what is referred to as “rower’s high” or “swing.” In his award-winning novel, *Boys in the Boat*, author Daniel Brown describes swing: “There is a thing that sometimes happens in rowing that is hard to achieve and hard to define... It’s called ‘swing.’ It only happens when all eight oarsmen are rowing in such perfect unison that no single action by any one is out of sync with those of all the others... Only then will the boat continue to run, unchecked, fluidly and gracefully between pulls of the oars. Only then does pain entirely give way to exultation” (2014, p. 161). Swing is not possible without clear signals being sent by the leaders of the boat, especially since “groups generally attune to the pacing preference of their highest-status members” (Pink, 2018, p. 184). Our teachers, students, and communities need our clear signaling and communication now more than ever. Are we consistently checking in with teachers and teams to provide this cadence of support and accountability? Are we a visible presence with students, parents, and the community? What signals are we providing to help everyone work together synchronously?

Safe Cultures of Collaboration

For any team to function at a high level, each member needs to feel safe to contribute fully. A few years ago Google set out to better understand how such cultures of collaboration were fostered on a team. Surprisingly, they found that the ethnicity, age, religion, experience, and background of individual team members was not really important to team culture and effectiveness. They found the following three things to be present in every effective team they studied:

1. *Equality of Conversational Turn Taking* – Each team member took about the same amount of air time during meetings. No one person dominated and no team members held back.
2. *Ostentatious Listening* – Each team member attended fully during meetings. They truly listened to others, were fully present, and clearly engaged.
3. *Psychological Safety* – Each team member felt safe taking risks, admitting mistakes, and making themselves vulnerable to others on the team (see Wooley et al., 2010).

On our canoe trip, a safe culture of collaboration was critical. Each person in our boat provided constant, quick, helpful, succinct and needed feedback to the others on the boat: “Switch sides; all paddle left; getting too far from shore, etc.” We did not act petty or take offense at this feedback, but welcomed it, knowing that it was critical for our safety and progress. With all of the distractions coming in the form of big waves and gusts of wind, we each had to really listen hard and stay focused in order to hear and respond to that feedback. Do team members each contribute in their own way? Can we openly and safely share feedback? Do we stay focused and truly listen to each other? Do those on our teams feel safe to fully contribute in paddling our team’s canoe?

Conclusion

Our collective, coordinated efforts are always needed, but even more so when challenging conditions arise unexpectedly. An unanticipated crisis can reveal our true colors and what we value. As C.S. Lewis taught, “surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is” (1952, p. 192). Sadly, the schools that are struggling most are those who prior to the pandemic had not clarified a compelling purpose, sent mixed or unclear signals, and paddled haphazardly through PLC-lite and unhealthy cultures. The schools that are thriving are those who prior to the pandemic had clarified a compelling purpose, sent clear signals, and sought to consistently paddle together as a true professional learning community. Truly, “crisis moments are revealing. They strip away carefully cultivated responses and force us to see ourselves for what we are” (Herald, as cited in Maxwell, 1974 p. 41).

“Please don’t try to do it alone. Relentlessly search for or build community.” (Saenz, 2012, p. 88). A pandemic is not the right time to be the all-powerful, individual hero, trying to muscle through the wind and waves on our own. Believe me, it doesn’t work. We tried it in Yellowstone and we wore ourselves out and made little progress. It was only when we paddled in sync that our canoe began progressing through the rough waters.

If any of our schools or districts are not currently paddling together in sync, let’s make the needed changes, and we will see the benefit. Once those in my canoe focused on our

compelling destination, started sending clear signals to each other, and began paddling in rhythm, we found our swing, and it truly was a beautiful thing. Peter Senge describes it this way: "When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit" (2013, p. 12). While finding our swing as a canoe did not spare us from exerting immense effort, what could have been a truly miserable, draining, and dangerous journey, turned out to be a marvelous, enjoyable trip, both during calm and stormy conditions. Conditions in schools are certainly stormy and challenging, and who knows if and when they will calm. How can your school and district better paddle together in swing? We'd all better sync or we just may sink!

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