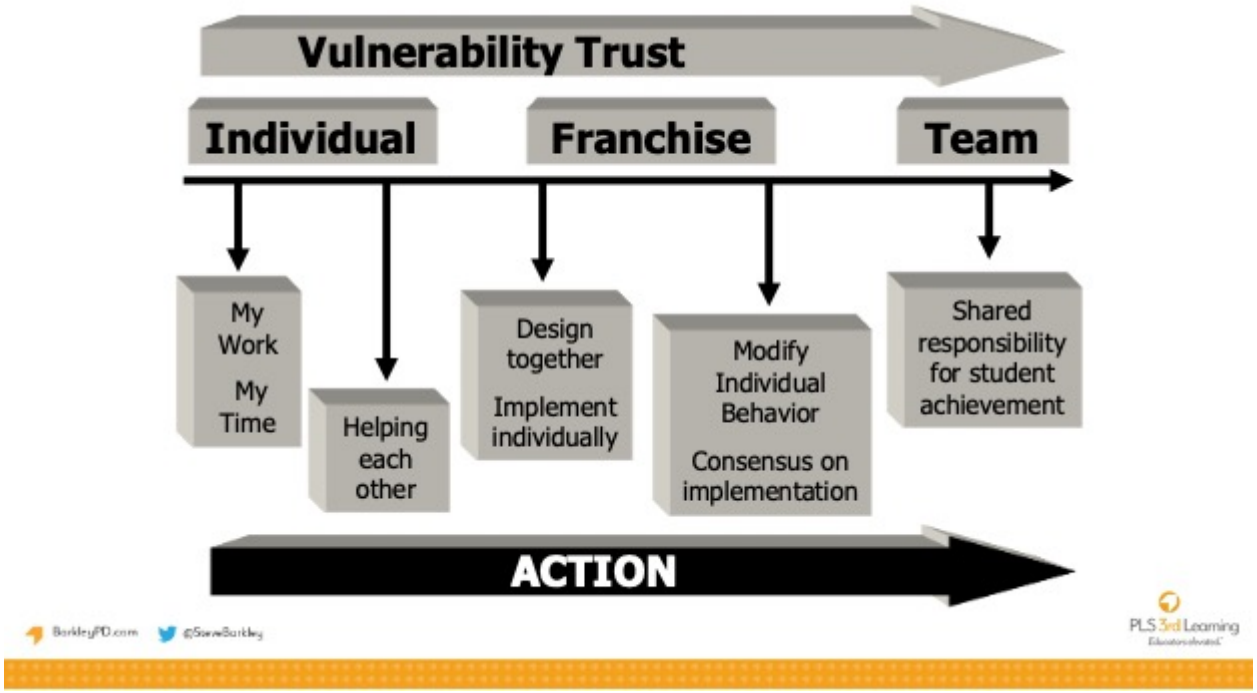
Planning for New Staff to Be Team Members

As a new school year begins, new staff and reassigned staff become members of existing teams. To what extent have administrative and teacher leaders purposefully planned processes to ease and speed up teams forming? While teams naturally build cohesion and effectiveness over time, it is possible to accelerate the team-building process. Consider intentional strategies that focus on establishing trust, clarity, and alignment early on, to speed up the development of high-functioning teams.

I use this continuum to describe the forming of teams as members move from working with an individual focus (my classroom/my students) to a franchise focus (we can cooperate to make things better for me and my students) to a team focus (our students/our success).



According to Bruce Tuckman’s stages of team development, teams go through predictable stages as they grow. (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning) Research suggests

that deliberate interventions, such as **setting clear goals**, **establishing trust**, and **providing structured opportunities for collaboration**, can help teams move through these stages faster and reach the "performing" stage more quickly.

For new team members, initial engagement in teamwork generally requires some risk taking and vulnerability. There is a sense of uncertainty in how teammates will respond to the new member's ideas and contributions. Teacher leaders and experienced team members can model risk-taking and vulnerability to communicate the safe environment of the team space. Sharing a struggle or concern around their work with students encourages the new member to risk similarly with the team. As the new member risks, trust is built.

> **"We don't build trust by offering help. We build trust by asking for help."**
>
> (Simon Sinek)

Another important element for team leaders to communicate is that new team members, means a new team. Everyone on an existing team should find that some change is necessary for the new team to form. Too often new members are expected to be a "replacement" for the individual who left. Team members should be considering the strengths and interests of the new member and how they can benefit the team. I describe that the bad news of working on a team is that your role isn't fixed……..the good news is your role isn't fixed.

I think the recommendations to focus on setting clear goals, establishing trust, and providing structured opportunities for collaboration connect with an earlier exploration I did around Mitchel Resnick's (MIT Media Lab, Lifelong Kindergarten) post titled "**Give P's a Chance: Projects, Peers, Passion, Play.**" His focus is on supporting young people to think and act creatively.

Projects – People learn best when they are actively working on

meaningful projects – generating new ideas, designing prototypes, and refining iteratively.

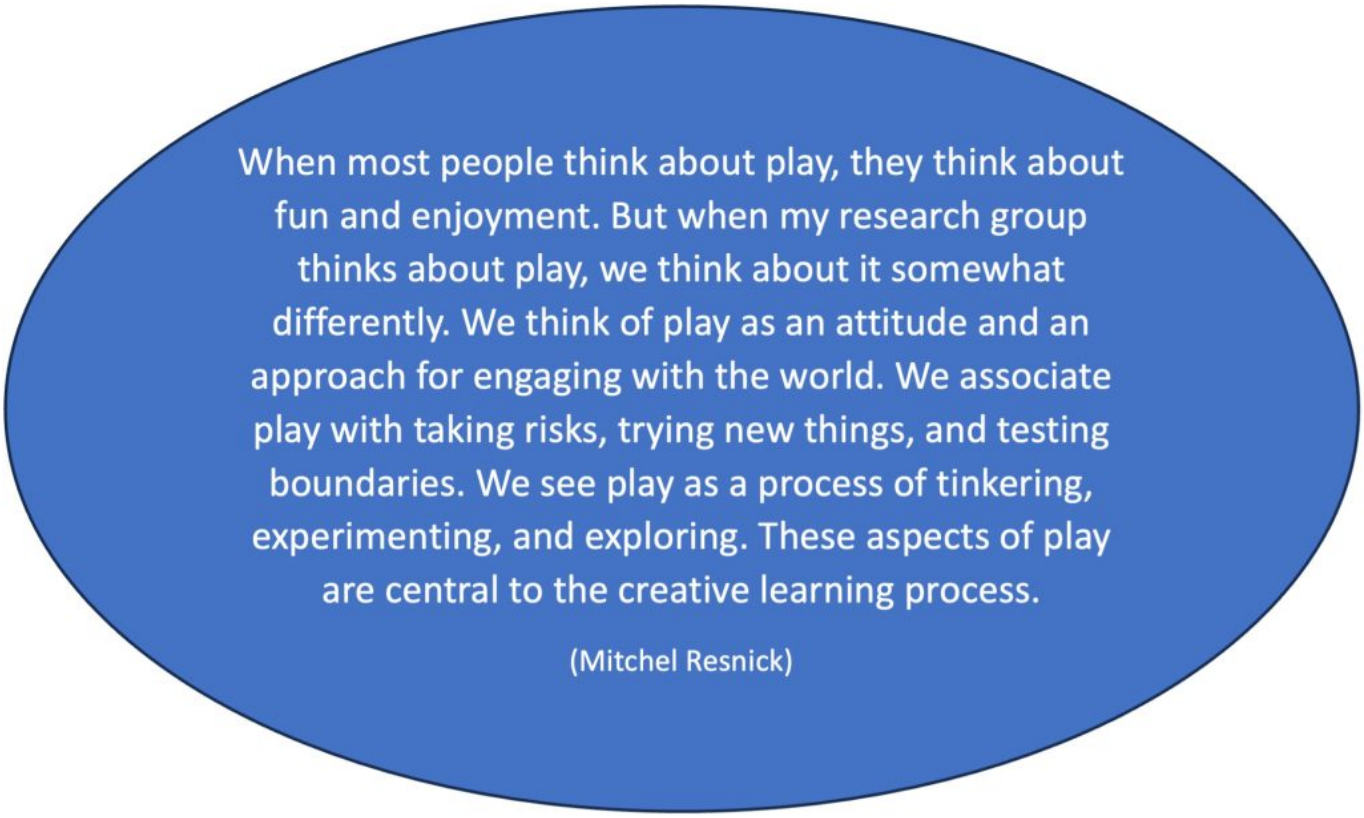
Peers – Learning flourishes as a social activity with people sharing ideas, collaborating on projects, and building on one another's work. Asking for and providing help increases the opportunities for discovery and learning.

Passion – When people work on projects they care about, they work longer and harder, persist in the face of challenges, and learn more in the process.

Play – Learning involves playful experimentation – trying new things, tinkering with materials, testing boundaries, taking risks, iterating again and again.

I think the 4 P's provide a good planning process for building educator teams to more quickly increase the quality of performance.

I've been using this phrase in my presentations on PLC's: **"Goals before Norms."** My thought has been that once a team of teachers identified a goal that they were invested in, there would be a reason to "live by" a set of norms. I have seen too many PLCs where the goal was assigned or too quickly selected. Some groups chose a goal that would be "easy to measure". Goal setting should be an opportunity for touching **passion and peers**. Agreeing on a goal that all members envision as a challenge and sense that achieving it would generate celebration are good guidelines.



A challenging goal that sparks passion leads to the formation of **projects** best approached with **play**. A challenging goal requires learning on the part of team members. What makes a goal challenging is the recognition that we don't know what to do. We must learn or discover what to do. (My phrase is, "What do our students need us to learn?") Most projects growing out of a challenging goal will be a hypothesis. (a supposition or proposed explanation made based on limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation) A hypothesis encourages trying new things, testing boundaries, taking risks, iterating again and again. Playing with possibilities to reach team goals may be one of the best opportunities for building team dynamic.

Encourage teaming with purposeful plans as well as giving time.