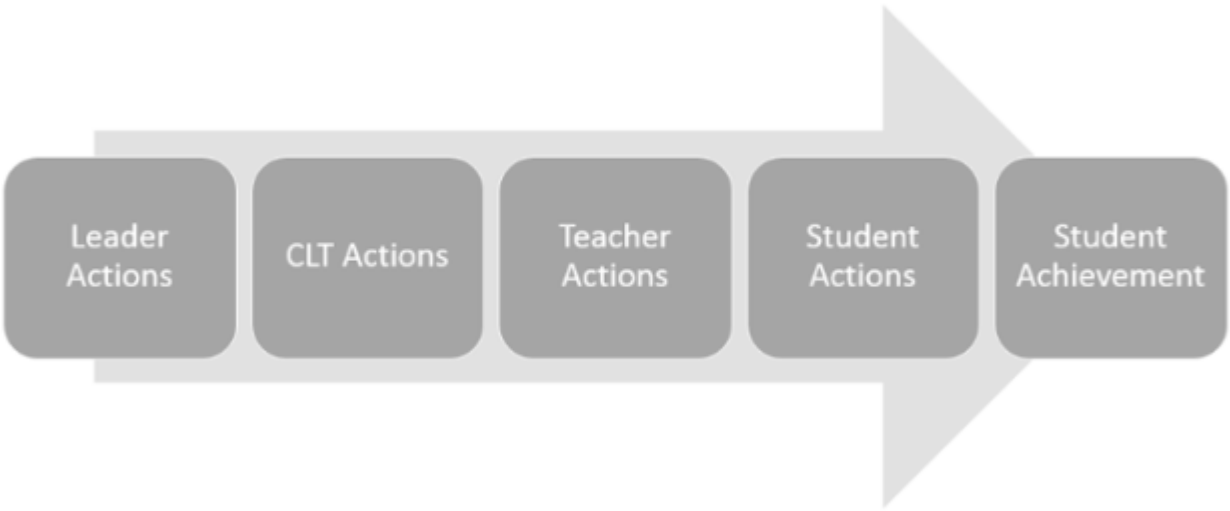
From Show-and-Tell to True Collaboration: A Team Leader’s Guide (Guest Blog)

I had the opportunity some years back to work with John Willis when he was the coordinator for staff development in Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. John now works nationally as a coach, consultant, and content creator through his Teaming Edge channel, focused on empowering teams and getting results. We reconnected recently around a training piece that John developed, and I asked him to share his thinking here.

Your team meetings might at times be show-and-tell sessions where teachers share what they’re doing, then go back to their classrooms and teach however they want. Meanwhile, students’ success depends entirely on which teacher they get.

Sound familiar? You’re not alone.

I have found that teams who use Steve Barkley’s Theory of Action break this pattern of “serial sharing” and get on the same page, taking collective responsibility to ensure every student gets excellent instruction regardless of which classroom they’re in.



Theory of Action is a powerful tool that increases the depth of collaboration. When a team sits down to backwards plan starting with a student outcome goal, best practice is to identify key actions that each stakeholder must engage in to achieve the desired outcome. Student actions have a direct effect on student outcomes. Teacher actions drive student actions. Team actions shape teacher actions. Leader actions shape team actions.

This progression helps empathize with each stakeholder resulting in everyone creating a greater capacity to take a more comprehensive view of teaching and learning. As a result, we can start to get laser focused on what each stakeholder can do (or stop doing) in order to best support the chain. Simple guiding questions can be used while planning.

Student Actions: *What should students do in class in order to increase reading stamina?*

Teacher Actions: *What can I do to encourage and support students in building their reading stamina?*

Team Actions: *How can we work together as a team to support consistent practices that develop reading stamina across classrooms?*

Leader Actions: *What structures, supports, and expectations*

can I put in place to help teams and teachers prioritize reading stamina?

Where Teams Get Stuck

Jumping straight to teacher actions. Teachers bypass student actions and jump straight to teacher actions. In fact, it's pretty common for teams that are lower on the collaboration continuum to engage in "serial sharing" of strategies they use in the classroom.

Try This Instead: It is normal for teachers to overemphasize what they do in their class because that is what they are hyper focused on. As a coach or team lead, encourage the team to pause and consider the student actions that are critical for achieving the desired outcome. Clearly articulating key student actions will make teacher strategies much more evident.

Giving vague answers. For example, a common "student action" for teachers and teams that I work with is for students to be "more engaged." That will likely mean different things to different people, none of which will likely be specific.

Try This Instead: It is normal for initial responses to be vague. Follow these vague answers with "what would that look like?" or "how would we measure that?" This will help support deeper thinking. The goal here is to identify student actions that are concrete, actionable, observable, and measurable.

Skipping meetings entirely. Teachers often feel overwhelmed and time constricted and meeting to collaborate, learn, and plan seems like a luxury they don't have.

Try This Instead: Support teachers in attending collaborative team meetings that actually make a difference to their professional lives. As the administrator, ensure that you are providing time in their schedule to meet as well as the space and resources needed to make this meeting innovative and

productive. As the team lead, ensure that you are creating a space that is psychologically safe to learn and contribute with team agreements that support voice equity and collegial conversations. Ensure that every teacher has a voice, a role, and leaves every meeting with knowledge and skills that will support their classroom. A key component of effective teams is that they value learning over business. Provide time for teams to learn about their students through "Looking at Student Work" protocols and learning how to implement targeted instructional strategies. The collaborative learning team meetings should be a rich place to learn concrete, actionable, observable, and measurable teacher actions that drive the student actions that get results.

Blaming student deficits. We all succumb to fundamental attribution error – attributing success to our skills while blaming failures on external factors.

Try This Instead: When teams get stuck on what students 'can't' or 'won't' do, use the Theory of Action to flip the script: What teacher actions could drive different student actions?

Still Not Getting Results?

What if the Theory of Action framework is not working? Teams lose focus and fail to implement the actions they agreed to take with their students. I have worked with many teams over the years and honestly, the results are mixed. I have found that to get the most out of the Theory of Action framework, the team must first establish team agreements that support psychological safety and voice equity.

The key here is accountability. This is where we can leverage the team's agreements. I recommend having accountability baked into the team agreements from the beginning. When creating team agreements you might consider the following guiding questions:

“How will we hold one another accountable for follow through?”

That way, as a team leader, you can hold the team’s action, or lack thereof, against the team agreements to highlight the gap. When a team has a voice in creating the team agreements and has awareness of the gap, they tend to take action to close the gap because we all want to live and work with integrity.

Here is a simple way to leverage the team agreements during each meeting in 60 seconds or less:

At the beginning of each meeting, briefly review the objective for the meeting. Then ask, “looking at our team agreements, which agreement(s) will best support us in achieving today’s objective?”

At the end of each meeting, ask, “which team agreements can we hold as an intention as we implement our plan this week?”

When teams truly implement the Theory of Action with accountability built in, those show-and-tell sessions transform into powerful collaborations where every teacher owns every student’s success.

I’d love to connect! Get weekly team protocols and tips on my YouTube channel and watch “Your Team’s Missing Link” to see this Theory of Action protocol in action with a real team. Reach out at john@theteamingedge.com.