Principals are often required to join or lead teams at the school and district levels, but they are given little instruction in how to create effective, energetic teams. A grassroots team-building technique can help educators tap their colleagues’ interests and enthusiasm.

One of the major objectives of principal preparation programs is to create a learning experience that not only builds collegiality among program participants but also allows them to put the experience into practice. Because principals and supervisors often work together to further their districts’ goals and objectives, it is important that prospective principals learn the value of teaming and strategies for determining team membership.

The most significant role of a principal or a school supervisor is to improve teaching and learning. Strengthening the connections among the people who work within schools and school districts is a powerful way to accomplish this. Bonstingl (1992) asserts that teacher and student productivity can be enhanced when departments create integrated opportunities for learning and discovery. Instruction is improved by creating cross-departmental and multilevel quality teams that break down role and status barriers to productivity.

Gene Maeroff (1993) outlines some underlying assumptions of teams:

- Those closest to the work know best how to perform and improve their jobs
- Most employees want to feel that they “own” their jobs and make meaningful contributions to the effectiveness of their organizations
- Teams provide possibilities for empowerment not available to individuals.

In a chapter on quality work teams in School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence, Lori Jo Oswald (1997) writes that although teaming may be cumbersome and time-consuming, the results are positive. When individuals develop their organization’s vision, mission, goals, and objectives as a team, they support and work toward achieving them. She developed significant rationale for work teams:

- Team members are accountable to others, which often increases work quality
- More and better information and actions emerge from a group of people with a range of backgrounds, experiences, and skills
- Fresh ideas and outlooks are presented and people learn from one another.
When more people are involved, it is more likely that mistakes will be caught and corrected.

There is strength in the collective power of a group that increases the acceptability and probability of risk-taking.

A Community of Learners
In their schools, principals are often expected to lead or facilitate teams of teachers, parents, and community members. In school districts that recognize the importance of the continuity of programs, principals lead, facilitate, and are members of districtwide teams composed of administrators and teachers from different schools.

When developing and organizing project teams, it is key to involve people who have expertise, something to contribute, and willingness to spend time and effort to improve the educational processes in a particular area. Successful teams are usually ones whose membership is voluntary and collaborative. Forcing team participation increases anxiety and resentment. Further, teams are less successful when members are appointed or the topic is of limited interest or has little relationship with what the participants do on a daily basis.

Schools and school districts that subscribe to the importance of continual improvement foster a community of learners. Learning must be an intentional and significant part of teaching and leadership of schools. School improvement only occurs if the people who contribute to students' educational experiences continue to learn. An effective school leader creates vehicles that lead to staff members' growth and meet the goals of the school and school district. Simultaneously, faculty members who work together in study groups show an increased interest in exploring school problems and opportunities to better serve students. Open Space Technology is an interesting and enjoyable way to develop teams that examine areas of mutual interest for individual professional growth and growth in school district initiatives.

A Grassroots Solution
Open Space Technology was developed by Harrison Owen in the mid-1980s as a method of uniting people from
across an organization. Owen noted that when members of African villages come together to explore ideas or work on problems, they sit in a circle. "He came to believe that something unique and profound can happen when a community gathers—not facing a leader, not with some facing the backs of others, but facing one another in a setting whose very structure suggests openness" (Alvarez & Conway, 1995, p. 35).

At conferences, Owen was struck by the energy and enthusiasm shared by participants during coffee breaks, when conversation attracts people simply because they feel it has some value to them. He wondered how to bring that energy to the sessions, knowing that conference agendas and sessions are set months in advance and have little flexibility to let participants discuss topics that interest them.

The Open Space method starts with 25 to 500 participants seated in a circle. They are given no preset agenda, only a theme significant to the group assembled. "The events operate on the premise that the best people to discuss a subject are those who want to, and that once given such an opportunity, they are also the ones most likely to improve them" (Brigham, 1996, p. 32).

The facilitator introduces a broad theme for the meeting and explains that anyone who has an interest in a topic related to the theme can come to the center of the circle, explain his or her topic, and invite others to join him or her for a breakout session. The session convener writes the topic on a piece of newsprint and tapes it to the wall. This process allows everyone to hear the session topics being proposed and see the agenda being formed. It also encourages exploring and brainstorming, so participants with similar interests may converge. Any topic is legitimate as long as it relates to the predetermined theme of the Open Space meeting (Alvarez & Conway, 1995).

After everyone has had a chance to suggest a topic related to the theme, the facilitator encourages participants to go to the wall and sign up for the sessions of their choice. The facilitator explains that the convener of each session has the responsibility to set a meeting time and place, chair the first meeting, and produce a brief record of it and that Open Space Technology has only four principles:

• Whoever comes are the right people
• Whatever happened is the only thing that could have happened
• Whenever it starts is the right time
• When it's over, it's over.

Finally, the facilitator explains the Law of the Two Feet: if you are not learning anything, move someplace else (Owen, 1997). Participants then disperse to the sessions they chose.

Program Participants Reflections on Open Space Technology:

Quality may depend on who is in your group; set clear expectations for one another. Develop a rubric for all projects.

You get to express your ideas and see what others think about the topic. Whether your idea is used or not, you have a choice in selecting your topic. Everyone had to work together to come up with the whole group’s project.

The resources provided by each group gave valuable information that each person would be unable to research individually. It is an invaluable tool for information gathering and networking.

The Open Space project offered the opportunity for different groups, [elementary and secondary practitioners] working together, to create staff development workshops that might be used in each participant’s home school for the same purpose. This is a practical way to have four or five staff development workshops on current topics available to each of us at the end of the course.

I think this is a great learning experience whereby every person is free to make his or her choice of the topic to research.

The Open Space process provided a sense of ownership as well as autonomy to groups. One is able to expand individual interest by researching and discussing the many facets of each topic. I loved this! I am already planning to use this in my Honors Government class. It gives control to the student and I believe this boosts pride and self-esteem. Instead of teachers and professors raising the expectations, the students do it for themselves. This was the best cooperative group project in which I have participated.

I would recommend Open Space to others because I firmly believe that the topics chosen were ones that the individuals felt a deep commitment to. . . . I also believe that this was a great opportunity for us to share information with others in our group and learn an abundant amount of information from others.

People bring more knowledge with them and will demonstrate more motivation when they are able to make a selection or are able to offer input.

It was easy to work in a group when all group members have an interest in the same topic. It makes working together much easier.
If some sessions generate little or no interest, conveners may choose to join sessions with related topics. Some participants may be persuasive enough to get a convener and followers to enlarge a session topic to address their interests:

The conflicts that remain—and some will—are seen not as a failure of Open Space methodology but as a sign of its success. How wonderful to have an agenda so rich that the participants must choose among many attractive offerings ... (Alvarez & Conway, 1995, p. 36).

Promise Into Practice
One of the objectives of an administrative training program is to create experiences that participants can use later as practicing school administrators. After studying the process and realizing that Open Space Technology could be a practical means to develop teams and enhance collaboration among a community of learners, we decided to use the process—with some modification—in our graduate classes. Elementary School Administration and Management and Secondary School Administration and Management were scheduled on the same evening, so we decided to combine the two classes to make a good group size.

Our goal was to have students work together in “school district” teams of three to five members to simulate a real district team of principals and supervisors. The teams would choose their topics through Open Space Technology. We agreed to use part of our first class to explain the process, talk about the importance of teams, and brainstorm topics currently of interest in school districts, which worked very well. The broad theme for the Open Space meeting was, In what administrative and managerial topics should we (as a school district team of principals) be experts to create a dynamic 21st century school?

Students came to the second class enthusiastic and eager to try the process. Because this was a new process for us all, we spent a little time reviewing the Open Space technique and explained that we would begin by forming one large circle in which everyone could see and hear everyone else. A person who wants to discuss a particular topic takes the floor, says his or her name, and tells the group, “I am interested in the topic [here he or she names the topic] because [here he or she gives some of the information he or she already knows about the topic and its importance for schools].” The topic leader writes his or her name on a piece of paper, leaving room for four other session members.

In a class of 18 students, 9 presented areas of interest as possible topics, including standards and assessments, budgeting, school safety, tracking, and inclusion. Students were not bashful about persuading their colleagues to join their teams. Some teams enlarged their projects to include the special interests of additional members. The work of some teams overlapped, so they decided to join forces. At the end of the evening, the students had formed two 4-member teams and two 5-member teams:

1. Assessment K–12: Reporting to Parents and Community, National and International Assessments (4 members)
3. Alternative Education: Creating a Climate to Meet Needs of At-Risk Students in an Era of Higher Standards (5 members)

Some students expressed sentiments that reflected on the larger purpose of becoming a principal or school supervisor. These comments have implications for practitioners:

The Open-Space presentations . . . made an impact on my professional code of ethics and values. It seems that the overall recurring themes in each group were community involvement, a clear focus and vision, professional development, and administrative support. These all become incorporated into one’s own code of ethics and values.

The activity provided an opportunity to develop leadership skills, organizational abilities, problem-solving skills, personal motivation, judgment, creativity, and decision-making skills.

The Open Space project afforded participants the opportunity to collaborate with team members to define roles, determine accountability, and formulate a plan. I realize the value and importance of collaboration, role setting, and role execution to reach the ultimate goal.

The Open Space project helped me understand changes in domestic and global society. Developing an understanding of external and internal systems and how they interact to affect schools is necessary if school systems are to be able to realize their objectives. The project allowed us to develop a training module that is current, realistic, and operational.
4. Inclusion: Adaptation of Instruction in the Regular Curriculum for Students with Diverse Ability Levels in Order to Achieve Higher Scores on State Assessments (members).

Because the teams were self-chosen, we were pleased to see a nice distribution of elementary and secondary principalship students on each team. In our classes, teams often form on the basis of friendships and congeniality, rather than on the participants’ interest in and significance of topics. The students were instructed to begin research on their topics, read widely on their own, meet as a team to discuss the subtopics that should appear in the final project, and assign responsibility for those subtopics to team members. Our hope was that the students would gain greater understanding of their topics (scope, depth, and detail) working in teams than they would working as individuals. In addition, integrating team members’ ideas might result in presentations that were meaningful learning experiences for everyone.

The culminating activity for the Open Space Technology project were group presentations by the teams. These presentations served as a staff development model for faculty members—for our purposes, the students’ classmates—and gave students valuable experience in team building, as well as information and resources.

During the last evening of the course, we evaluated the use of Open Space Technology. Participants were asked to respond to questions using a 5-point scale (1 being excellent; 5 being very poor). Although only two of the participants who completed the evaluation had used Open Space process before, all participants felt they had a fair-to-good level of understanding of the process (2.53). They agreed that Open Space was an excellent way to bring current educational issues to participant consciousness (1.47). They also believed that participants had a very good degree of control over the topics (1.53), and that the method was a fair way to form the groups (1.47) because each student had the chance to speak for a topic and persuade others of its value. They rated the ease with which their colleagues took leadership in suggesting topics as good to excellent (1.41).

Participants gave low scores to the process by which they joined a group (1.76) and the bargaining process (1.7). Although these ratings are still favorable, they suggest that facilitators must spend time talking about the number of members that make a viable group and discussing the bargaining process. Some leaders will not be persuasive enough to recruit followers to their topics; those topics must be abandoned. In addition, when groups with similar topics combine, prospective members must negotiate the scope of the project as well as the membership. When asked whether they would recommend Open Space to others, 16 participants said yes (94%), and 1 said no (6%).

We reflected on our experiences as instructors. All but one student seemed to grasp the value of using Open Space to form groups equitably and fairly. The process also empowered participants to work on topics they deemed important. One caution we do offer: each group must receive ample time to present their material because the information is usually substantial. Further, we believe that Open Space Technology be first introduced and used at the building level in larger school districts then expanded to create K–12 study teams. In small school districts, the technique could be used to form cross-level teams immediately. We enthusiastically recommend Open Space as a method to enhance community learning through the formation of teams on significant topics of mutual interest. Our belief is that it will serve professionals in good stead as a strategy for continuous school improvement.

References


Sr. Mary Frances Grasinger (grasinger@duq.edu) is a professor of education administration at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA.

Wilton L. Barber is a visiting teaching associate in education administration at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA.