

# Creating a Culture of Collaboration

The Building Blocks of Transformational Teamwork



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# Introduction

Teachers and school leaders often describe their schools in terms of the adult collaboration they hope to see, almost as if they are dreaming of a school that does not yet fully exist. When asked, they will often describe an environment that favors collective experimentation, learning from mistakes, and free-flowing exchanges of ideas — a kind of collaboration that creates rich, frequent, and transformational growth opportunities. Many educators know that high-quality collaboration is one of the most effective ways to learn, grow, and improve their practice, and yet it remains exceedingly rare in many schools. What are the barriers preventing teachers from creating highly collaborative environments in their schools? How can school leaders more effectively support collaborative work between teachers? And, at the core, how can educators define effective collaboration in order to create it in our schools? What can be learned from schools and organizations that might be “ahead of the curve” in these endeavors? What are the building blocks that will allow schools to create cultures of collaboration among leaders, faculty, and staff, in order to improve teaching and learning?

In 2015, the E.E. Ford Foundation awarded the Folio Collaborative and McDonogh School a \$250,000 matching grant, with the goal of fostering teacher growth and improvement through systematic approaches to collaboration.

**The hypothesis was, and remains, that finding more effective ways to support and enhance collaboration among teachers will benefit the overall quality of teaching and learning in our schools.**

Folio Collaborative is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit used by over 150 independent and public schools, originally spun out of McDonogh School. Our technology platform, myFolio, makes professional growth visible to leaders and validated by peers. It emphasizes space for conversation, feedback and self-reflection. Our work for this leadership grant focused on two key questions: “What factors support rich and meaningful collaboration within a school environment?”, and “In what ways might a technological tool facilitate more effective growth-oriented collaboration?”

*What factors support rich and meaningful collaboration within a school environment?*

*In what ways might a technological tool facilitate more effective growth-oriented collaboration?*

# Our process and the resulting framework for effective collaboration

To support the learning and design necessary for this work, Folio developed a Design Team composed of teachers and school leaders from McDonogh and other Collaborative schools to bring a variety of perspectives to the research. The work of this grant was a rare opportunity for educators to step outside of their own school environments to capture information about a topic that is both central to the culture of schools, yet also seems incredibly challenging to create and attain.

Two central premises sat at the foundation of the Design Team's work. Those beliefs were:

**Learning, professional growth, feedback, and effective collaboration are inextricably linked**

**A truly dynamic culture of collaboration can only occur in an organization that sees all educators as being in a constant state of learning and growth**

These core assumptions were reinforced and confirmed at every turn as the Design Team built a deeper understanding of the characteristics of deeply collaborative organizations.

Beginning with the question, "What does effective collaboration look like?", the team utilized a Design Thinking-inspired process to build a deep understanding of the question and to generate creative, user-inspired responses. The first phase of the research process involved site visits to highly collaborative organizations. Over the course of the year, the team visited schools, non-profit organizations, and for-profit companies to examine effective collaborative practices and interview individuals throughout each organization.

After completing the site visits, the Design Team conducted empathy interviews with a representative set of Folio member schools: curiosity-driven conversations structured to build deeper understanding of our Folio users and their opportunities and struggles with respect to collaboration in their schools.

Our site visit research yielded a set of core findings about what makes for highly collaborative organizations; the empathy interviews helped us identify user-focused problem statements related to the challenges of collaboration specific to schools. The Folio team then synthesized these research outputs into a framework made up of five core elements: 1) an organization's definition of collaboration; 2) the behaviors necessary to promote collaboration on a daily basis; 3) the democratic sharing of wisdom that feeds a collaborative dynamic; 4) the way the organization lays the foundation for collaboration; and 5) the ways power dynamics are actively managed in order to foster collaboration.

# The Core Elements of a Collaborative Culture



**Establishing clear expectations for collaborative practices**

**Living a shared culture of collaboration**

**Encouraging and supporting faculty and staff to share collective wisdom**

**Designing space, time, and teams to promote collaboration**



**Balancing hierarchy with distributed leadership and collective ownership**

# Design Team as a model: Learning about collaboration by collaborating

We hoped we would learn about collaboration through collaboration when designing this process, and we did. The Design Team, made up of members with diverse professional roles and personal backgrounds working at schools across the country, reports that being able to connect in this way — sharing wisdom and undertaking a meaningful task together — has been a deeply impactful professional development experience. The framework elements described below turn out to effectively describe many of the workings of the Design Team. In moments where our work has fallen short, this framework underscores what we should have done differently. The Design Team approach is also a promising model for collaboration across schools, given the degree to which teachers and leaders crave collaborative opportunities not only within their own schools but also with individuals at other institutions.

## Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and their role in our framework

Principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are inextricably linked to high-quality collaboration. Every aspect of this framework has complexities and implications — discussed in the pages that follow — pertaining to its intersection with DEIB principles. For the purposes of this work, DEIB is defined as work that fosters fair treatment and equal opportunities across race, gender, class, and other dynamics. It also includes respect for the range of human differences as well as an ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of school life\*. Fostering a culture of collaboration and building an equitable and inclusive school must exist as paired and interrelated initiatives — neither can stand on its own as a tool for school transformation.

\* "Anti-Racism Toolkit" Georgetown University, [guides.library.georgetown.edu/antiracism/glossary](https://guides.library.georgetown.edu/antiracism/glossary).

# A snapshot of our visit sites

In selecting sites to visit in our research, we identified a diverse cross-section of organization types, both within and outside the K-12 education sector. We exclusively selected organizations renowned for their collaborative cultures and commitment to collaboration as a key element of adult learning. These organizations granted our team access to proprietary information as part of our research, with the assurance that we would report our findings confidentially. Our dozen sites included the following:

**A top-tier professional men's sports team** whose leadership has prioritized “professional collisions” between staff from various segments of the organization, minimized hierarchy and barriers between executives and employees, and created a culture with a distinct absence of toxic masculinity. The organization strategically organizes its space to encourage collaboration between departments, and has ingrained norms emphasizing reading and the sharing of research with each other.

**A charter school network** that has gained national recognition by attaining high levels of student achievement through an academic program rooted in collaboration, personalization, equity, and authenticity. The organization has consistently been willing to upend the status quo in terms of how schools and learning are structured, making both teacher collaboration and student collaboration a centerpiece of daily work. It has also been highly intentional about the ways collaboration is designed, structured, and showcased, mirroring great collaborative student practices with great collaborative adult practices.

**A Fortune 500 company** that has pioneered responsive leadership and employee self-management. The organization focuses on offering guidance through core values and then providing high levels of autonomy to individuals and teams in terms of how they operate and innovate in order to live up to those values. Decisions tend to be made collectively. Individuals in this organization spoke about the importance of carefully tending culture and of carefully assessing in the hiring process the collaborative skills of applicants. There is a lot of pride around the idea that people and communication are at the center of everything this organization does.

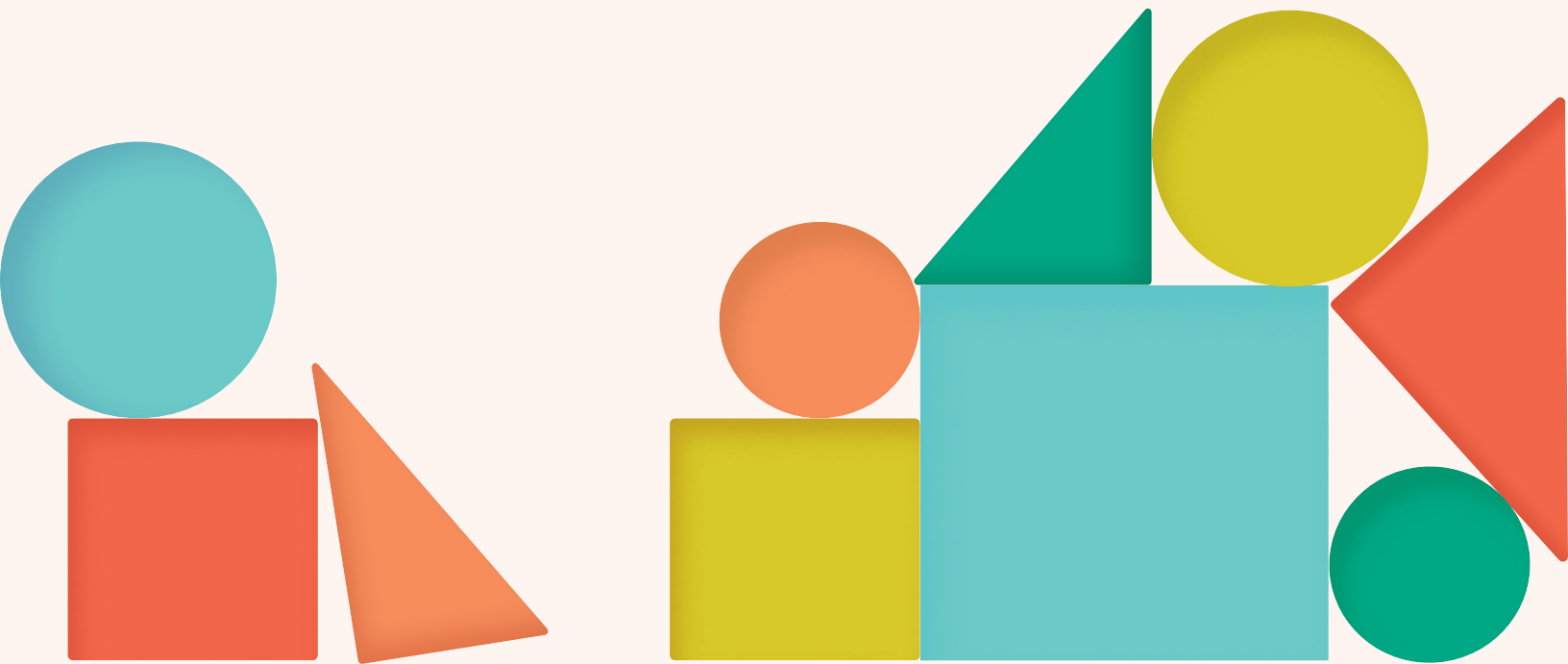
**A medical center and medical school ranked as one of the top in the nation**, where project-based learning is at the center of the educational process. In this organization, feedback drives work and learning and is shared by all members of a team at multiple stages throughout a process. Structure, in the form of protocols, systems, and policies, is seen as a key tool in supporting equity and collaboration; thoughtful decisions are made at every juncture as to how to reduce hierarchy and power dynamics, as well as how to utilize roles and protocols to drive successful teamwork.

**One of the world's largest technology companies**, where structured modes of collaboration are central to every work process. New managers are trained extensively in how best to support their direct reports and foster safe, collaborative team dynamics. The organization thinks carefully about how best to balance individual and collaborative time; collaboration is considered a form of research and data gathering, a way to get to know what your colleagues know and their unique perspectives, which informs potential user experience.

**A leading graduate school of design**, where collaboration is visible everywhere. Space and time are used skillfully to trigger inspiration and foster collaboration. The organization believes a decentralized power structure is the healthiest dynamic for collaboration; there is a strong tolerance for risk and an inclination to say “Yes” wherever possible.

**And a collection of independent schools from around the country** whose practices sit at the cutting edge of a variety of aspects of education: teacher training and development, expeditionary and interdisciplinary learning, international education, and project-based learning. At all of these schools a clear trend emerged: the further schools move away from tradition and status-quo, the more intentionally they need to make effective collaboration a centerpiece of their work.

# Framework: The Core Elements of a Collaborative Culture





# The Building Blocks of Transformational Teamwork

## Establishing clear expectations for collaborative practices

Define effective collaboration and agree on its importance

Define best practices around feedback

Make collaboration a key element in hiring, onboarding, and professional learning

Scaffold the collaborative process

## Living a shared culture of collaboration

Build trust, inclusion, and psychological safety

Model vulnerability, collaboration, and growth-orientation from the top down

Create a culture of feedback

Normalize healthy tension, failure, and creative risk-taking

## Encouraging and supporting faculty and staff to share collective wisdom

Enable sharing of collective wisdom through multiple modalities

Celebrate a wider array of expertise

Celebrate and model sharing, asking, and growing

Structure formal and informal opportunities to learn from each other

## Designing space, time, and teams to promote collaboration

Design the space

Design the time

Design the team

Keep symbolism in mind

## Balancing hierarchy with distributed leadership and collective ownership

Flatten the interactions

Support autonomy, in balance with common purpose and clear roles

Build formal and informal opportunities for distributed leadership

Make every voice and every identity matter

# Establishing clear expectations for collaborative practices

Sometimes, stating the obvious is important, for what is obvious to some is rarely obvious to all: if an organization believes in — or aspires to support — effective collaboration as a means for professional growth, this expectation must be stated and defined.

It is therefore not surprising that many of the exemplar organizations we visited had clearly-defined values and philosophies that prioritized collaboration, made visible in mission statements, hallways and classrooms, and articulated in interviews with members of the organization.

The importance of collaboration, the tenets of effective collaboration, and the relationship between collaboration and growth were all spelled out explicitly, publicly, and repeatedly.

We found that collaborative organizations also spent time carefully considering their practices for offering feedback and engaging in growth-oriented conversations. They embedded feedback opportunities into the rhythms of the organization or school and set clear expectations for the frequency and structure of feedback conversations, from the post-project debrief to peer-to-peer feedback all the way to employee-to-supervisor feedback.

As a result of establishing and communicating expectations around collaboration and feedback, more time in these organizations was spent engaging in high-quality collaboration that helped employees grow and improve their practice. These organizations benefited from the kind of deep, trusting relationships that come from years of candid, thoughtful, and skillfully-given feedback. Productive work and learning occurred. Conversations went deeper, tensions were explored, conflicts were addressed instead of left festering.

**DEIB Complexities and Implications:** This building block destabilizes the sometimes problematic concept of “working well with others,” used historically to deny access to “outsiders” in independent school cultures. By making invisible notions of collaboration visible, schools can root out potentially exclusive practices and give everyone a clear set of expectations. However, for every step a school takes to clarify and codify the rules of collaboration, it runs the risk of calcifying and othering — “if you don’t collaborate like us, you’re not one of us.” Norms must adapt and evolve, benefitting from new and diverse ways of thinking that enter a community with every new hire. As part of the norm setting process, promote cultural competency and ensure you acknowledge and include different communication styles.



Everyone discussed hiring – this was a big motif on our visit. They facilitate collaboration on the front end by making sure, to the extent they can, that they hire people who deeply value collaboration. How do they do this? They ask layers of collaboration questions during a long vetting process.



In this organization, collaboration time is understood to be most effective when: there is an agenda, a conversation can happen in advance, there is time to connect and problem solve, and there is an understanding of the importance of action steps.



The after-action assessment of how things went is an essential component of the group's thinking (and growth) routines. Time and again during the visit we heard, 'that will come up in the debrief' and 'the debrief allows us to consider...'



We saw multiple 'Working Agreements' documents posted. Faculty teams had working agreements. Classrooms had working agreements. These are visible norms, created by the users, to define how they will collaborate behaviorally.

# Recommendations for School Leaders:

## Define effective collaboration and agree on its importance

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We do not all come from the same backgrounds, so there is no reason to expect that everyone in your organization will initially agree about what effective collaboration is or why it matters. Host inclusive and open-minded conversations to define what effective collaboration looks like and why we do it, and then make those expectations public, highly visible, and often referred-to. Make a mission-linked case for why collaboration must be part of the core work of every faculty and staff member at the school. And be open to reevaluating your definition as new members with their own backgrounds and perspectives join and improve your community.

## Define best practices around feedback

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Be especially intentional about building and articulating institutional best practices about how to give and receive feedback well. Weave these practices throughout everything you do, from work with students to daily conversations among peers. It may feel scary or awkward to take a highly-structured or protocol-based approach to feedback, or to have conversations in a more “head-on” way than you are used to, but be brave — adopting a healthy feedback culture can be transformational in a school.

## Make collaboration a key element in hiring, onboarding, and professional learning

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Having articulated definitions of collaboration and feedback enables you to attend to collaboration in your HR functions. In the hiring process, assess collaborative strength and inclination the way you do other key skill areas, not as litmus tests but as part of the candidate's holistic profile. Given that collaborative expectations are not universal, build onboarding programs that teach collaboration according to your school's definition, avoiding the assumption that any collaborative approach is “common sense.” Create professional development for all employees that builds and improves collaborative skills, keeping in mind that even (or especially) some of your longest-tenured employees might need help improving around collaboration.

## Scaffold the collaborative process

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Once you have expectations in place, you will likely need to build those into processes. Provide agenda templates, protocols, roles, and expectations. Ask groups to create and share working agreements. Ensure that group work effectively balances the affective — making space for groups to check-in, share, and bond — with the execution of concrete tasks. Ask groups to reflect on their work together, and be prepared as the leader to coach groups, intervene, and provide feedback to a group just as you do to an individual.

### Recommended Resources:

[The Art of Coaching Teams](#) (Elena Aguilar)

[Protocols](#) (NSRF)

[Thanks for the Feedback](#) (Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen)

# Living and maintaining a shared culture of collaboration

Strong collaborative cultures do not spontaneously appear, nor do they run on “autopilot” on those rare occasions when an organization successfully builds such a culture.

The exemplar organizations and schools we visited were places where the culture was intentionally built and carefully and effortfully maintained, and where collaborative values had been “baked in.”

Tending and prioritizing relationships and trust amongst colleagues is a key indicator that shared values are truly embedded in an organization’s culture. In responding to the Design Team’s questions, organizations pointed to the sense that “everyone’s voice counted” within an organization, particularly in schools when a cooperative relationship existed between school leadership and teachers.

In cultures like these, there was a sense of genuine delight in learning from each other and taking risks. Organizations understood that good collaboration entailed risk-taking, tension, and failure, and that these were in fact desirable characteristics of high-quality collaborative work. Similarly important was the organization’s lived stance around feedback. These organizations appreciated the way authentic collaboration both led to the sharing of feedback and was also supported by high-quality feedback. In an existing school culture, leaders can identify these cultural characteristics as priorities; and then devote time to designing systems and models to reinforce them.

**DEIB Complexities and Implications:** This building block contains practices designed to support anti-racist culture. However, these practices are not fundamentally more equitable if they simply cover lingering biases and inequities. Furthermore, collaborative behaviors such as risk-taking, vulnerability, and candor — as well as many other practices we detail here — may land differently on those with less privilege in the system. Historical trauma and inequity do not disappear just because we adopt new collaborative practices in an institution.

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**Leadership has internalized and modeled the organization's norms around inclusion and teamwork; any new initiative is expected to be collaborative, regardless of what level of the organization it originates in.**

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**The leadership models collaboration and growth through their words and actions, seeking input in meetings and publicly acknowledging when they have made missteps.**

“  
**There is a strong belief that collaboration requires healthy tension and that all the conditions – time, space, skill, emotional intelligence – must be attended to in order to help teammates effectively work through tension.**

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**There is a culture of feedback with a lot of feedback loops between staff members. One intern referred to feedback as a gift. This requires a high degree of trust.**

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**Their norms and culture encouraged disagreement with respect. Members of the organization did not shy away from expressing alternate points of view, and did so in a way that made it clear they were disagreeing with the idea, not the person.**

# Recommendations for School Leaders:

## Build trust, inclusion, and psychological safety

There are cultural and psychological precursors to effective collaboration, most notably a sense of trust, a feeling of belonging, and the belief that one's contributions to discussion will be welcomed, respected, and safe from retribution. Investigate levels of trust and psychological safety in your organization. Train leaders on topics of equity, inclusion, and psychological safety, and ensure that teams incorporate trust-building activities into their routines.

## Model vulnerability, collaboration, and growth-orientation from the top down

Our egos are some of the most significant obstacles to effective collaboration and authentic exchange of feedback. Lead by example and help other leaders do the same, owning mistakes publicly when they occur, asking for feedback, letting others (including those lower in the hierarchy) take the lead, and speaking publicly about the ways in which you are still learning from others. At every level, from board to school leadership to teaching teams, organize your major initiatives to be team-driven, to honor a diversity of voices, and to make decisions collectively.

## Create a culture of feedback

Organizations with effective collaboration tend also to be those where feedback is exchanged often and both given and received skillfully. This is not easy to do, but the cultural payoffs are significant. In addition to defining what we mean by effective feedback, provide professional learning opportunities for all staff members on how to give and receive feedback well. Give people feedback...on their feedback! Create cadences and structures within the organization for faculty and staff to ask for and receive feedback. The discomfort associated with giving and receiving feedback may make it hard to make feedback a part of your culture initially and with those new to the organization, so be persistent and creative in maintaining this culture.

## Normalize healthy tension, failure, and creative risk-taking

A major barrier to collaboration and innovation is the belief that problems have only one right answer. Look for ways to honor divergent solutions, celebrate mistakes taken in the name of learning, and walk towards dissent and disagreement, even in public and even when it makes you or others feel uncomfortable. Make a point of trusting and honoring ideas and perspectives that aren't yours, and encourage others to do the same.

### Recommended Resources:

[The Culture Code](#) (Daniel Coyle)

[Dare to Lead](#) (Brene Brown)

[What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect](#)

[Team](#) (Charles Duhigg, NYT)

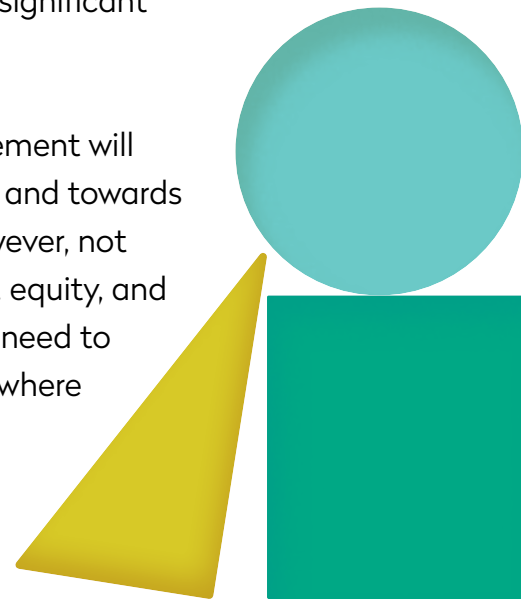
# Encouraging and supporting faculty and staff to share collective wisdom

A longstanding paradox within schools begins with the fact that faculty and staff are intelligent, lifelong learners, skilled in problem-solving and often in possession of years of experience crafting their teaching expertise through thoughtful trial-and-error. Yet many schools report that there is little sharing of this wisdom between teachers; each teacher exists as a well of deep knowledge, unconnected to the other deep wells that are their colleagues.

In a time when problem-solving in private industry and other sectors has become much more collaborative, and when the challenges and opportunities in education seem more significant than ever before, so much unrealized potential 'exists for faculty to be connected collaborators who problem solve and crowdsource curiosities, practices, conundrums and solutions together.

Our site visits and empathy interviews cast this challenge into stark relief: the innovative organizations we visited modeled highly dynamic collaborative cultures where knowledge-sharing and the democratization of information was everywhere; simultaneously, we hear from many teachers, staff members, and school leaders about the ways in which their schools still experience significant barriers to sharing information and learning from each other.

**DEIB Complexities and Implications:** Schools that attend to this element will move away from believing there exists one right way of doing things and towards an appreciation and valuation of diverse ideas and approaches. However, not all members of a community may feel they have the cultural capital, equity, and safety required to share ideas in democratized systems. Schools will need to work against microaggressions and patronization to create a space where all are truly included.





# OBSERVATIONS FROM OUR TEAM

**People in the organization read often, sharing books and research with each other; it seems to be a part of their established culture at this point.**

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**Faculty expressed genuine delight in learning from and with each other, and noted how unusual this experience is compared to other schools in which they have worked. They truly appreciated each other, their students, and their families.**

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**Progress at this organization came after building trust and a community understanding that sharing half baked ideas is actually important!**

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**One teacher spoke specifically to the ways in which multiple identities (musician, poet, writer) could be supported because their interaction is collaborative in nature.**

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# Recommendations for School Leaders:

## Enable sharing of collective wisdom through multiple modalities

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Time, space, and worry about speaking up in public are some of the central barriers to sharing wisdom. Break down these barriers by creating online ways for the community to ask for and share help, ideas, and resources. Seek input on initiatives using multiple modes, and ask other leaders to do the same. At the same time, make sure to also create opportunities for those who like to talk through problems with others to do so in ways that cross boundaries and bring in new voices.

## Celebrate and model sharing, asking, and growing

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Most school cultures have unwritten norms about “staying in one’s lane,” staying out of something not related to one’s formal role or duties. Disrupt this. Encourage faculty and staff to visit colleagues’ classrooms and share ideas or resources based on what they saw — cancel a meeting to give “time back” in order to make this feasible, if necessary. Ask any administrator launching an initiative to include outside voices on their task force. Celebrate and spotlight ways outside perspectives have made your school better. And most importantly, make growth — and a growth mindset — an expectation for all in the organization. We all have room to grow, every year, and must see collective wisdom as a key resource in that growth process.

## Celebrate a wider array of expertise

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Faculty and staff have so much to offer outside of what is written in their formal job descriptions and resumes. Seek ways, in person and via technological channels, to document and celebrate the teacher who moonlights as a hip-hop artist, the communications director who used to be a lawyer, the English expert who also happens to have the mind of an engineer. Find ways to connect their expertise to contexts where it might be useful.

## Structure formal and informal opportunities to learn from each other

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Sharing of collective wisdom doesn’t always happen on its own. Create faculty/staff meeting protocols where colleagues seek feedback from those outside their department or grade. Launch Unconferences and Lunch-and-Learns. Devote the first five minutes of every faculty/staff meeting to having a different colleague share a best practice or teaching tip. Create more informal opportunities, too: happy hours, coffee breaks, bring-your-family picnics. The more faculty/staff connect in new ways, the more sharing will occur. Start strategic conversations by doing a “room check” to ensure all voices are represented — ask who should be in the room and consider postponing the meeting until those additional perspectives can be invited to the conversation.

### Recommended Resources:

[The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth](#) (Amy Edmondson)

[The Role of Leadership in the Promotion of Knowledge Management in Schools](#) (Michael Fullan)

[Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation](#) (Steven Johnson)

# Designing space, time, and teams to promote collaboration

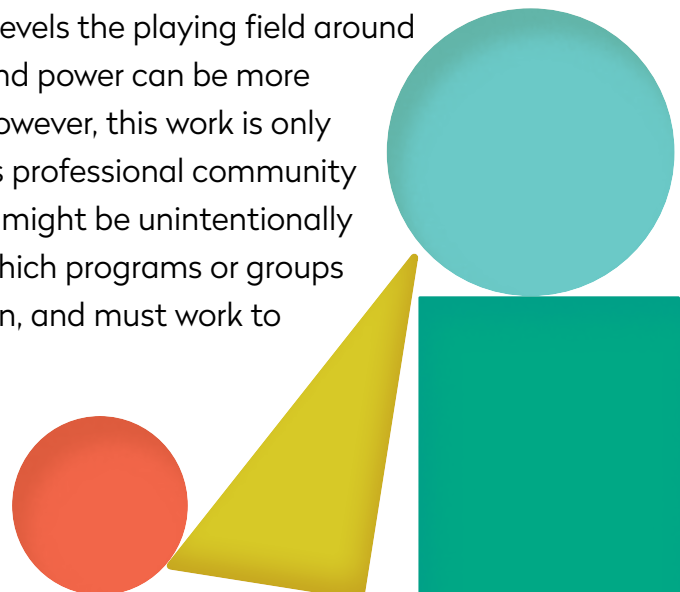
**The highly-collaborative organizations we visited did not cross their fingers and hope for collaboration; they intentionally designed their use of space, time, and team structure in order to create formal and informal collaborative opportunities.**

As architects have known for millennia, the ways in which societies and organizations use and engineer their space have tremendous implications for collaboration: in ways large and small, resource-intensive and thrifty, we witnessed organizations drive and support collaboration through intentional use of space. Time is also a key resource when it comes to fostering collaboration. **In many schools, a shortage of time — be it perceived or real — is the greatest challenge to collaboration.** The organizations we visited shaped their schedules to protect and prioritize high-quality collaborative time by teachers, deprioritizing other considerations to make this happen. Teams themselves also need to be designed. Membership, roles, and tasks can be constructed to help groups be more effective in their collaboration. Highly collaborative organizations tend to be more intentional about how they engineer their teams and define the work their teams are charged with completing.

*We found that the symbolism of how organizations use time, space, and team structure to support collaboration can be as important as their functional aspects: redesigning your space and time to help people work together sends a clear message about organizational values, norms, and priorities.*

The payoff from these design efforts was clear: designing for collaboration led, in the schools and organizations we visited, to increased trust, creativity, willingness to take risks, a sense of belonging.

**DEIB Complexities and Implications:** This building block levels the playing field around collaboration, considering how resources, opportunities, and power can be more equitably distributed to support inclusive collaboration. However, this work is only equitable if it takes into account all members of a school's professional community and attends to the inequities or barriers that exist or that might be unintentionally created. When redesigning, we must carefully attend to which programs or groups of people are asked to sacrifice for the sake of the redesign, and must work to avoid reproducing patterns of privilege.





**They've designed their space to invite face-to-face and what they call 'surprise meetings.' The office is one big open plan, and each floor has different items people might need (snacks, supplies), which requires people to have to leave their work stations to go see other people.**



**The basic organization is teacher teams. A grade level may be comprised of two teams and two classes in each team...a teacher team of two share an office that adjoined the two classroom spaces.**



**There is physical evidence of collaborative practices with white-board surfaces and Post-it notes EVERYWHERE.**



**Weekly meetings often privilege collaboration. Every day there is a 8:00-8:30 meeting for teams, vertical/discipline groups, whole faculty, etc. Also, every other Wednesday is an early release to privilege collaborative faculty work.**

# Recommendations for School Leaders:

## DESIGN

### Space

Find ways to disrupt, to the greatest degree you can, the status quo of individual teachers spending time in their solitary classrooms with doors closed. While ensuring that there remains space for quiet individual work, look for ways to make space more collaborative. Consider communal — even cross-grade or cross-departmental — offices. Explore open collaborative spaces, potentially to be used by both students and teachers. Rework furniture, adding whiteboards and large communal tables. Create flexibility within space configurations by using, where possible, movable furniture and walls. “Shape the path” for interaction by creating common spaces that draw faculty and staff together informally in “professional collisions,” for lunch, coffee, or simply through the act of picking up mail and materials.

### Time

Identify and protect time for formal, structured collaboration in your daily/weekly schedule and annual calendar, being willing to deprioritize other things to make this happen. Consider late start and early dismissal for students on certain days to allow for protected teacher collaboration; investigate whether there are existing duties you might relieve teachers of in order to allow for teamwork, legacy programs you might sunset, or traditions you might end that no longer fit the school's identity. In schools where collaboration has often been neglected for years, it may take some significant redesign of schedules and rethinking of priorities in order to carve out time for collaboration.

### Teams

We learn best in groups where the task and the team are each intentionally designed with an eye towards the other. Charge groups with meaningful tasks, such as collaborating to (re)design and teach a course, adopting a new pedagogy such as project-based learning (PBL) or interdisciplinary learning, or solving a pressing problem within the school. Spell out the charge of the group carefully, along with information about what success will look like. Be intentional about who is assigned to each team and why: diversity of thought, style, tenure, and background are crucial parts of high-functioning growth-promoting teams, as is building teams that feel both safe and challenged by each other. Ensure that, over time, roles and opportunities rotate to give opportunity to all.

### Keep symbolism in mind

The symbolic is often as important as the functional in schools. Look for ways to use time and space symbolically to underscore the value your school places on collaboration, by posting norms, highlighting the ways you have scheduled for collaboration, clearly labeling spaces designated for collaboration, and installing fixtures (ex. whiteboards or furniture) that signal collaboration as the central function of a space. Make it a cultural norm for groups to leave “visible thinking” for others to see (ex. leaving the “mess” of a collaborative session on a public whiteboard).

### Recommended Resources:

[Make Space](#) (Scott Doorley and Scott Witthoft)

[Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much](#) (Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir)

[Unlocking Time](#) (abl. schools)

# Balancing hierarchy with distributed leadership and collective ownership

Perhaps paradoxically, a cultural shift towards more autonomy and more distributed leadership can lead to a higher degree of collective ownership and collaboration within organizations.

**Autonomy and distributed leadership demand more collaboration, as more voices are valued in the organization's decision-making processes, and lead to a greater sense of collective ownership.**

The willingness to be a “team player” also stems from collective ownership (the degree to which people in an organization feel they have social and political capital in the institution) as well as distributed leadership (the degree to which people feel empowered to make decisions that affect the institution as a whole). Do individuals feel that they matter, as a whole person and as someone with a unique point of view? Do they feel like their work matters enough to demand collaboration and shared input around key decisions?

Our site visits confirmed global trends: at companies, schools, and organizations known for their innovation and collaboration we took note of highly-distributed leadership patterns and high levels of collective ownership. However, hierarchy isn't all bad: autonomy and distributed leadership need to go hand-in-hand with clear roles and a clear sense of common purpose, and it did at the organizations we visited. If employees understand the direction the organization or team is going in, understand who is responsible for each aspect of the work, and have increased say in how to get there, they will be more engaged both in their own work and in their work with others.

*Balancing the efficiency and clarity of traditional hierarchical school structures with a greater degree of inclusion of individual ideas, perspectives, decisions, and identities leads to a greater willingness for individuals to cooperate, compromise, and take risks on a collaborative endeavor.*

**DEIB Complexities and Implications:** A key component of building more equitable schools involves rethinking power dynamics. However, this is not the same as pretending the power dynamic doesn't exist — if hierarchy is here to stay, we need to acknowledge that. Transparency is key when it comes to power differentials. The point is not to shy away from the power you hold, but to name it and clearly communicate how and when you will choose to exert it. And for leaders with marginalized identities, the political calculus of transitioning a school culture away from traditional decision-making structures is different, and the political risk greater, than for a leader with identity-based privilege. The benefits of changing an organization's culture and structures to support distributed leadership must be considered alongside other potential costs and challenges.



# OBSERVATIONS FROM OUR TEAM

**This is a low-ego environment that removes 'silos' between departments; all ideas are welcome from all personnel.**

**There is a decentralized power structure, which members of the organization believe produces the healthiest dynamic for collaboration.**

**Teachers were clear about how much they value being able to focus on their practice. They wanted more feedback. Faculty coaches were a great way to address the request.**

**Teachers can have different approaches in the classroom, but they are expected to follow common threads so that the program is cogent for students.**

**The customer service team is not trained in fielding phone calls nor in what they should say. Since the mission is about 'delivering WOW through customer service,' the customer support team will stay on the phone as long as they need to to facilitate what a customer needs.**

# Recommendations for School Leaders:

## Flatten the interactions

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One of the downsides of hierarchy is the way it can make those at the bottom of the pyramid feel disempowered, which can lead to feelings of not wanting to collaborate or not feeling one has anything to offer in collaboration. Look for ways to minimize the experience of hierarchy and power dynamics, doing whatever you can to humanize and deepen relationships among all members of the professional community.

## Make every voice and every identity matter

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It's easier to be a team player when one feels that one's ideas and personhood are valued. Consider what elements of collective and inclusive decision-making you can implement. This does not mean every decision needs to be made via consensus; look for opportunities to seek input (rather than consensus) through focus groups, calls for feedback, open meetings, town halls, and decision-making structures like dot voting. Ensure that your structures make space for all identities and all life circumstances. Be clear and consistent throughout about how input will be used and who will make the final decision. Leaders who take in input have a greater responsibility to listen and respond to that input, whether or not they make a decision that aligns with it.

## Support autonomy, in balance with common purpose and clear roles

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Collaboratively set common purpose and give more autonomy over how faculty and staff get there. Reconsider expectations around standardization, looking for opportunities to provide more flexibility — especially for teams — to do things their own way. While allowing more flexibility in process, provide exceptional clarity for team member roles: everyone must clearly understand who is responsible for what. Autonomy should come with responsibility: ask those who do things differently to share and document what they learned from their divergence, to help the organization as a whole improve.

## Build formal and informal opportunities for distributed leadership

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Build a set of formal leadership opportunities like peer coach, technology integrator, course/grade team leader, committee member, and meeting facilitator. As you delegate and spread the decision-making, make roles and responsibilities crystal clear. Consider informal opportunities as well — giving feedback to a peer, facilitating a team meeting, designing a new program or course. Then identify these as leadership opportunities and find systems to give a diversity of colleagues a chance to lead. Don't forget to train and develop these leaders so they succeed in their new roles.

### Recommended Resources:

[Primed to Perform: How to Build the Highest Performing Cultures Through the Science of Total Motivation](#) (Neel Doshi and Lindsay McGregor)

[Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness](#) (Frederic Laloux)

[Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World](#) (Stanley McChrystal)



# Enhancing the myFolio platform

The Design Team's key findings and problem statements provided a backbone for ideation, prototyping, and design of a suite of software features within Folio Collaborative's technology platform, myFolio, all of which exist to support high-quality collaboration as defined within our five elements. These features debuted within myFolio in August 2020 and continue to be refined and expanded in response to user feedback to support deeper school-level collaboration.

## A framework for building more collaborative schools

Establishing clear expectations for collaborative practices

Living a shared culture of collaboration

Encouraging and supporting faculty and staff to share collective wisdom

Designing space, time, and teams to promote collaboration

Balancing hierarchy with distributed leadership and collective ownership

## ...informing a suite of software features to support collaboration within and between schools

A structure for **categorizing, aligning and organizing** goals, discussions, and resources, to facilitate collaboration (within schools and across schools) by topic and theme



School-wide professional growth themes

Tools to help goal-driven professional growth feel more **authentically personal, more actionable, and more clearly owned** by faculty / staff.



Goal Wizard and Goal Check-Ins

A virtual space designed to support the **sharing of collective wisdom** in authentic, democratized ways, within schools and eventually between schools.



Community Feed

THE  
EDWARD E. FORD  
FOUNDATION



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The Edward E. Ford Foundation seeks to improve secondary education by supporting U.S. independent schools and encouraging promising practices.

McDonogh School is a community that finds joy in work, in play, in discovery, and in the realization of personal potential. Strong, mutually respectful relationships inspire a passion for teaching and learning, a dedication to personal integrity, and a commitment to excellence. Embracing diversity of background, culture, and thought, the school builds upon its founder's original mission to provide life-altering opportunities and to develop in students the will "to do the greatest possible amount of good."

Folio Collaborative is a leader for educators. We help our members drive change by making professional growth a priority. Proudly designed by independent school leaders and teachers, Folio traces its roots to McDonogh School in Baltimore, Maryland.



Folio combines three essentials for professional growth: tools, training, and community. Our technology platform, myFolio, makes professional growth visible to leaders and validated by peers. Over 150 prominent independent and public schools have already joined the Collaborative.

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