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## Sticking together: How glue guys work in education

### Leadership



In North American sports they are known as 'glue guys'. They are not the ultimate stars of the team so their names are less familiar than those of LeBron James, Sidney Crosby and Aaron Rogers, and their pay is dwarfed by the \$700 million Shohei Ohtani will be paid in his current baseball contract, but every successful team needs them.

A glue guy is defined as *"a guy who's unselfish and who's a good teammate. A guy who communicates well and who's honest with his teammates and himself. Somebody the other guys can count on to offer advice or encouragement. He keeps everybody loose, but at the same time, focused"* (David Ross quoted in Janssen 2023). As the name suggests, they are the people who bind the disparate parts of a sports team together in order to ensure that everyone is working together.

Key attributes of a glue guy include the ability to see the bigger picture and realise that it is not about the individual, but instead it is about the team and that to perform at their best, a team is only as strong as the weakest link. Vince Lombardi, the iconic American Football coach, is quoted as saying "Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work." and it is the job of the glue guy to reinforce that. This reinforcement often happens in private, sometimes in the dressing room before or after the game and their input is especially valuable when things are not going to plan. True glue guys are willing to challenge behaviour that does not contribute to the overall success of the team.

The simile between education and sport is not a new one but whilst the concept of a team is commonplace in both, surprisingly little work has been done on what its makeup should be. Standard group theory tends to stress the importance of teamwork (Belbin 1991) and this is likely to be included in the person specification when job vacancies are advertised. However, the reality is that whilst Belbin suggests 9 different team roles, the ability to work as a team player is rarely

effectively tested at interview, possibly due to the difficulty in measuring something that is intangible in nature. It is our contention that within higher education, the vital role of being a team player is often underappreciated and is not considered in many cases. Furthermore, those who excel at the team player role are often overlooked for advancement in a similar way to sport's glue guy who is underpaid compared to the stars of the team.

The true measure of the effectiveness of what someone brings to a team is often the impact that person leaving has on the performance of the group. An example of this is that the dominant Chicago Bulls basketball team of the 1990s, featuring Michael Jordan (commonly acknowledged as the best player in basketball history) was never quite the same when Scottie Pippin, described as 'Robin to Jordan's Batman', left the team. Pippin, despite being only the 122nd best paid player in the league, was the glue that held the team together and his move to the Houston Rockets was a key reason for the decline of the Chicago team.

Within education, the increased marketisation and focus on metrics (Ball 2003) has meant that the educational imperative, which we can define as viewing education as a goal in itself, is becoming far less prevalent with each part of the school having their own targets to meet. Whilst targets are not inherently negative, an excessive focus on them leads to a culture of individualism, which means that everyone is obsessing on what they need to achieve, rather than seeing the bigger picture about what is best for the whole organisation.

So, what can be done about this and how can we promote the importance of glue guys within education? Despite the seeming decline of the educational imperative, most universities are still run on a collegiate basis with the emphasis amongst academics focusing on working together rather than individualised efforts. Whilst metrics are an important part of day-to-day life in universities, there is a growing consensus that if an excellent experience is provided for students, then positive metrics will follow, and this reinforces the need to work together within the sector. Returning to Belbin, all of the various roles need to work together to achieve success, something that it is the role of the glue guy to ensure happens.

What this all means is that far greater emphasis is needed on the teamworking element and understanding of the role that people play in their educational setting. Indeed, there is a strong argument to say that we should not be appointing staff who cannot work in a team. Whilst this is tricky to accurately assess at a formal interview, there are ways of gaining an insight into this key attribute. Applicants for teacher training programmes often complete a teamworking task which assesses how well they interact. This could be an alternative to the presentation that is traditionally used when recruiting new academics. In addition, the profile of glue guys needs to be raised. Examples of how that can be done include explicitly acknowledging them in annual awards and moving away from structures which emphasise one person leading each area, to an approach which creates collective leadership, hence recognising the power of the team.

After all, without the glue it would all fall apart.

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#### References

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