

Trust the Process: Team Building is Not an Event

BY DR. MELISSA CASTEEL

There is this basic value that whatever you do, you do for the community and the family. It is not about you as an individual. Yes, it is important to do well, but because it will enable others to do well. Even in the midst of dire circumstances, people will say “let me see if I can help.” - [Anna Escobedo Cabral](#)

Months ago, I was asked about how our team navigates team building. I thought, “We value the outcomes of team building, and I can write about it.” Then COVID-19 hit Chicago, and team building was the furthest thing from my mind!

Currently on a shelter-in-place order, I am filled with a mix of anxiety and gratefulness. I am grateful for my work team - our relationships, connections, collaboration, and dedication. Ah, I am thinking about our team, built on the foundation that relationships matter. Interactions matter. Learning environments for children and adults matter.

Most of our work has always been remote, and we have been transparent and intentional about creating an environment of trust and support from the beginning. The Leadership Freak, [Dan Rockwell](#), shares “Positive environments are never an accident.” I knew that a time would come when we had a particularly challenging day, and the only people who could really understand were those on our team. Yes, family and friends could offer support, but the acknowledgment of, “I hear you, and I get it” would come from us. I never would have thought that our foundation would carry us through a pandemic! Our first virtual team meeting, after our university went on full remote status, was a heartwarming reflection of a connected team.

In *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit Leadership for a Multicultural Age*, [Juana Bordas](#) (2012) describes that in collectivist cultures “...leaders are expected to listen, integrate the collective wisdom, and reflect the group’s behavior and values. Leaders charge people up, facilitate their working together, and help them solve problems. As they empower others, a community of leaders evolves.” In this time, I’m grateful our environment is grounded in a collective orientation.

The process of strengthening our connections has been directly tied to the development of our professional outcomes in support of early childhood teachers and administrators. Some strategies we use to build our team include:

Starting with Why: As a diverse team (education, experience, race, ethnicity, and age), sharing *why* we do this work is our way of exploring each other’s cultures and passions and discovering our common purpose in working together. Learn more from this TED Talk, [Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#).

Sharing Joys & Concerns: Our team meetings start with an opportunity to share who we are before discussing what we do. We build relationships that have sustained us through the joys and challenges that

are an inevitable part of life. Shout out the McCormick Center's very own, Linda Butkovich, for instilling this practice!

Breaking the Ice: New team members lead the ice-breaker at the next meeting when they join our staff. We learn so much about a person through the activity they choose, and integrating them into the team early is an intentional part of our process.

Being Critical Friends: We reflect on our work and critique each other from a place of growth and learning. In our [professional learning community](#) (PLC), we struggle with the discomfort of disagreeing with a colleague, but we're coming to appreciate the value of learning and growth that results. Learn more about [Deepening Critical Reflection](#).

Having Team Teach-Outs: We don't have to be experts, but we all have expertise. Learning with and from each other is valued. Team members rotate leading much of our professional learning.

Leveraging Technology: [Dan Rockwell](#), says, "Energy is social" and considers every interaction to be an energy exchange. We strive to exchange positive learning energy when we come together in person and virtually. We use various technology tools to manage our work *and* maintain our connection (e.g., Zoom, Google Docs, and Trello).

Trusting the Process: [Fred Rogers](#) reminds us, "Human relationships are primary in all of living. When the gusty winds blow and shake our lives, if we know that people care about us, we may bend with the wind, but we won't break." Our team has its share of challenges, but we reflect on our strong foundation to get us through the difficult times...together.

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