



**Background on USN and Our Team**

**Conditions and Context**

**Organizing around Projects and Products**

**Building for Belonging**  
**An Effective Leadership Team**  
**SAIS Summer Conference**

**Quinton P. Walker, Head of Upper School**  
**University School of Nashville**  
**June 2023**



## Today's Session



**1**

**Sharing (and doing) a few of the check-ins and routines that our team uses to build belonging, psychological safety, and trust**



**2**

**Sharing some of the ways in which we can work together by virtue of having a strong sense of belonging and belief in one another**



## A Few Things to Note as We Start



## A Partner Share

What is a dilemma that is within your control that you are worried about acting on? It could be a particularly challenging project. A tough relationship that needs repair. A series of conversations. Bringing forth a new idea to the school...

What would it take to make steps forward?

What's your willingness to act upon it in the next six months?



## Our Mission

University School of Nashville models the best educational practices. In an environment that represents the cultural and ethnic composition of Metropolitan Nashville, USN fosters each student's intellectual, artistic, and athletic potential, valuing and inspiring integrity, creative expression, a love of learning, and the pursuit of excellence.

## University School of Nashville

- 1080 Students K-12
- Neighbors with Vanderbilt
- 1 in 4 applicants admitted
- 39% Students of Color / 26% Faculty of Color
- Community Sustains Us
- Average Faculty Tenure of 17 Years
- Head of School Transition



## **Our Team**

**Tenure:** 90 years

**Our Training:**

educators,  
philosophers,  
psychologists,  
sociologists, scientists,  
organizational  
theorists, historians,  
linguists, musicians





## Background on USN and Our Team

1

Nothing we share here is new; developing our team has been a function of attentiveness, intentionality, and care.

2

Managing up is a real (and powerful) process; we laugh about it and we expect it to be the case for each of us as we do our work.

3

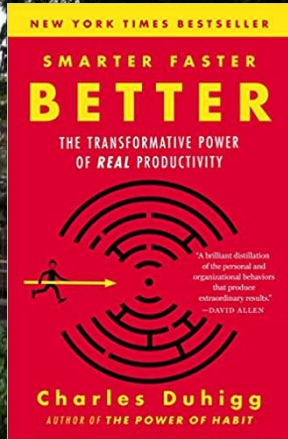
As much as we're leading a school, we're leading change. Our team deeply believes that change and school leadership are part and parcel.

## A Few Things to Note as We Start

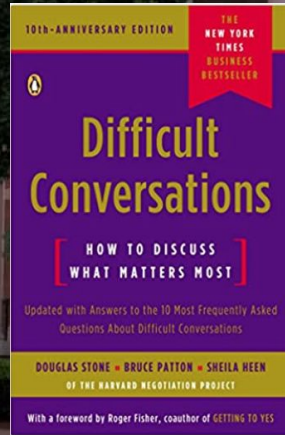




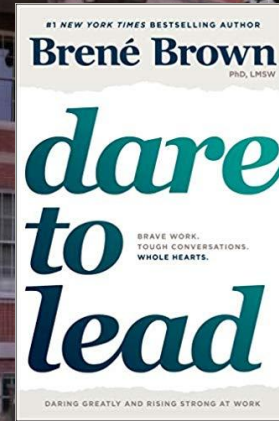
# Conditions + Context



Trust + Psychological  
Safety



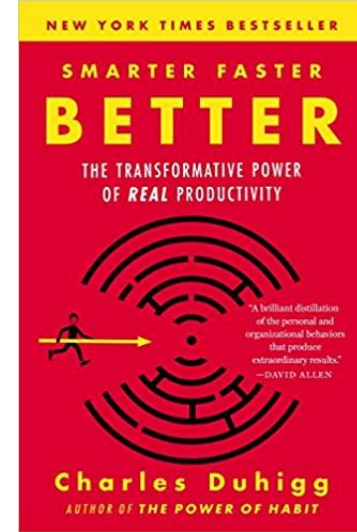
Challenging  
Conversations



Collective Values  
Exercise

# Edmondson's Psychological Safety

- Members are comfortable admitting mistakes and bringing up difficult topics.
- The team learns collectively from these errors and challenges.
- A safe environment where members share – with confidence – that the team will not shame, embarrass, reject, or punish.
- Team becomes stronger, more connected, and better engaged. Data and insight continue the team's growth.





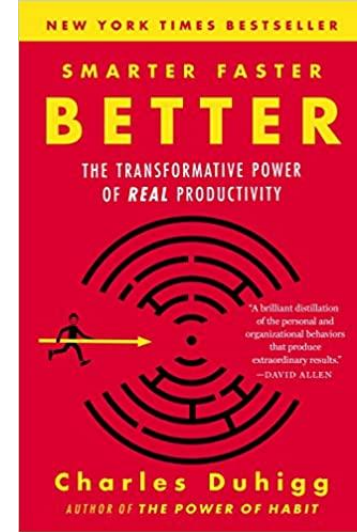
# A Partner Share

Turn to someone not at your school.

For 90 seconds, share something you're facing a good bit of professional resistance around.

What are some of the sources of that resistance?

How are you working to navigate that resistance?



# Thinking about Conflict and Difficult Conversations

## Students

### What's My Level of Comfort?

Fairly high, given my understanding of the key values and expectations of the high school. I'm comfortable with kids expressing a range of emotions. It's always my hope and intent to come from a place of care.

### What's My Go To Strategy?

I think a lot about how to keep students' best interest in mind. What can I do to demonstrate my care and concern for students. I do my best to be a good listener and affirming, even if things are challenging.

### What Have you Learned & Noticed about USN?

Students can view pushback or difficult conversations as an expression of disbelief in them. I've had to consciously work to develop a sense of rapport with students – holding accountable, conflict, and challenge can be wrapped in care.

## Colleagues

With my peers (other admin), it's pretty good, though it's person dependent. Some of my colleagues are open to productive conflict; others are more avoidant.

I feel there are times I have to slide into a more diplomatic or peace-maker mode, given who I am and the role I have the school. There are times when I'm less direct (and usually it's okay, but not always).

I find that my peers can be somewhat conflict avoidant. And that occasionally things feel "passively permissive." I challenge that when I can but it needs to feel like a calculated decision.

## Parents and Families

Given the school culture, I feel good about productive conflict and struggle (e.g. counseling a student out of USN, a major disciplinary moment)

I do lots of prep work for these conversations. Thinking about how I want people to feel. The outline and flow of the conversation. How to frame the conversation with others. I'll even do some practice with other individuals involved.

On the whole, I feel like parents and families trust me to do what's best for kids, even in hard moments. I'm also realizing that at USN, we can't always swing for the fence with a conversation – we have to do things in a way over time (which can be frustrating and inefficiency)...

10th-ANNIVERSARY EDITION



THE  
NEW YORK  
TIMES  
BUSINESS  
BESTSELLER

## Difficult Conversations

HOW TO DISCUSS

WHAT MATTERS MOST

THE 10 MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED  
QUESTIONS ABOUT DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

DOUGLAS STONE & BRUCE PATTON  
OF THE HARVARD NEGOTIATION PROJECT

With a foreword by Roger Fisher, coauthor of GETTING TO YES



## Brown's Organizational Priorities

We avoid tough conversations

We spend an unreasonable time managing problematic behaviors

Diminishing trust caused by lack of connection + empathy

Not enough people taking smart risks or sharing bold ideas

We get stuck and defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures

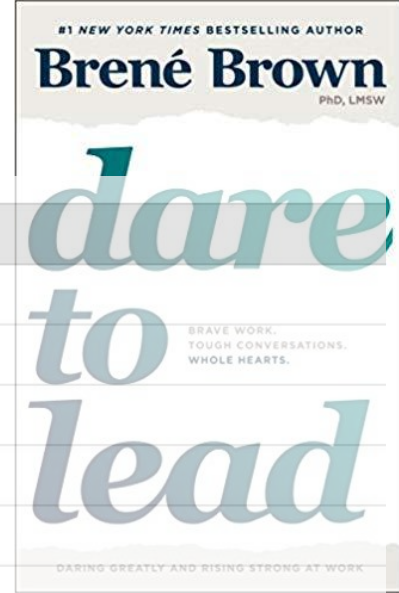
Too much shame and blame; not enough accountability and learning

People are opting out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity

Rushing into ineffective or unsustainable solutions rather than ID'ing problems + solutions

Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations rather than behaviors

Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing







# **How We Work: Organizing Around Projects and Products**




## Groups

- Strong, clearly focused leader
- Individual accountability
- Purpose is same as school mission
- Individual work-products
- Runs efficient meetings
- Measures effectiveness indirectly
- Discusses, decides, and delegates

Adapted from "The Discipline of Teams"  
(Katzenbach & Smith, Harvard Business Review, 1993)

## Teams

- Shared leadership roles
  - Individual and mutual accountability
  - Specific team purpose that the team delivers
  - Collective and collaborative work products
  - Encourages open-ended discussions and active problem solving meetings
  - Measures performance by collective work products
  - Discusses, decides, and does real work together
- 

# The Role of Coaching (or project management?)

Coaching is about **enhancing the ability of others** through a constant observation and conversation of performance, grounded in a relationship premised in trust and openness

35%

## **Directive**

Helps by instructing, advising, and giving feedback based upon observations

## **Facilitative**

65%

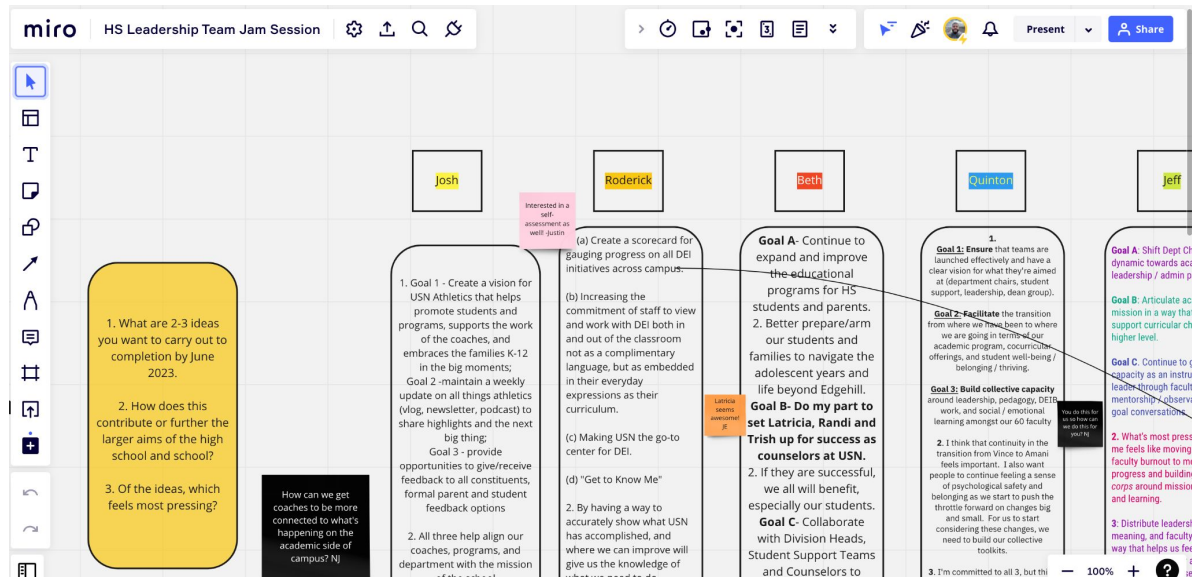
Helps by asking reflective, guided, and open questions



1. What are 2-3 ideas you want to carry out to completion by June 2023.

2. How does this contribute or further the larger aims of the high school and school? Your growth?

3. Of the ideas, which feels most pressing?






## So What Does that Mean for Our Team?

In a community that values advocacy, voice, deliberateness, conversation, and autonomy, our **team's leadership** requires listening, diplomacy, empathy, care, and a steady focus on the goals and aims of the school

We can't overstate the importance of being a **non-anxious presence** for our students and faculty





# Considering the 2022-2025 in the High School

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Today

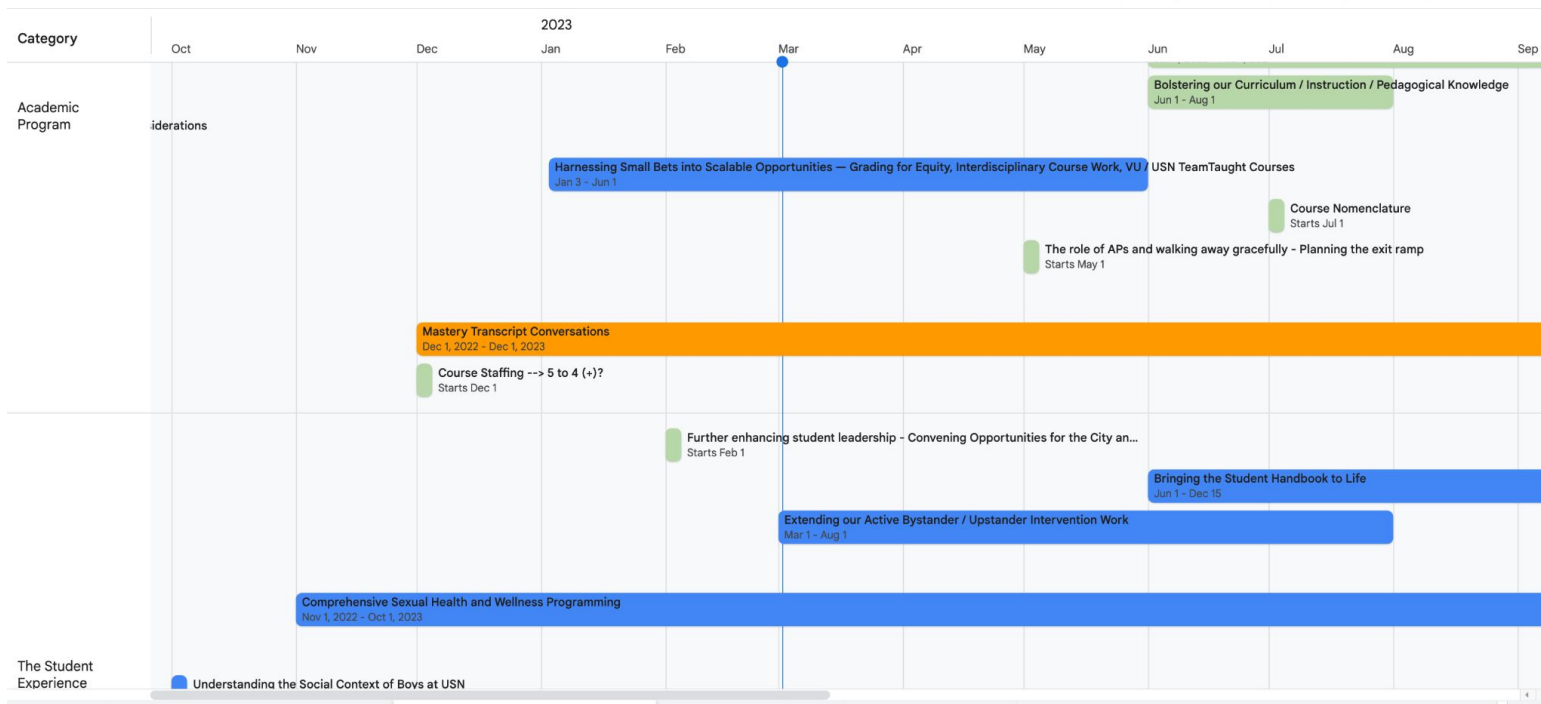
Years

Comfortable

100%

Settings

Support





# THE TAKEAWAYS

**Spend time with one another  
deepening personal relationships  
(quality over quantity)**

**Sharing accountability for collective  
projects, concepts, and programs is  
essential**

**Don't let efficiency or urgency dictate how  
the team functions -- a deliberate approach  
matters**



# THE TAKEAWAYS

**Modeling collegiality for faculty and students has been essential to our success**

**Balance conversations that are generative in nature vs. determinative in nature**

**“This is our challenge” as opposed to “This is my problem to solve” helps us share in accountability and problem solving**



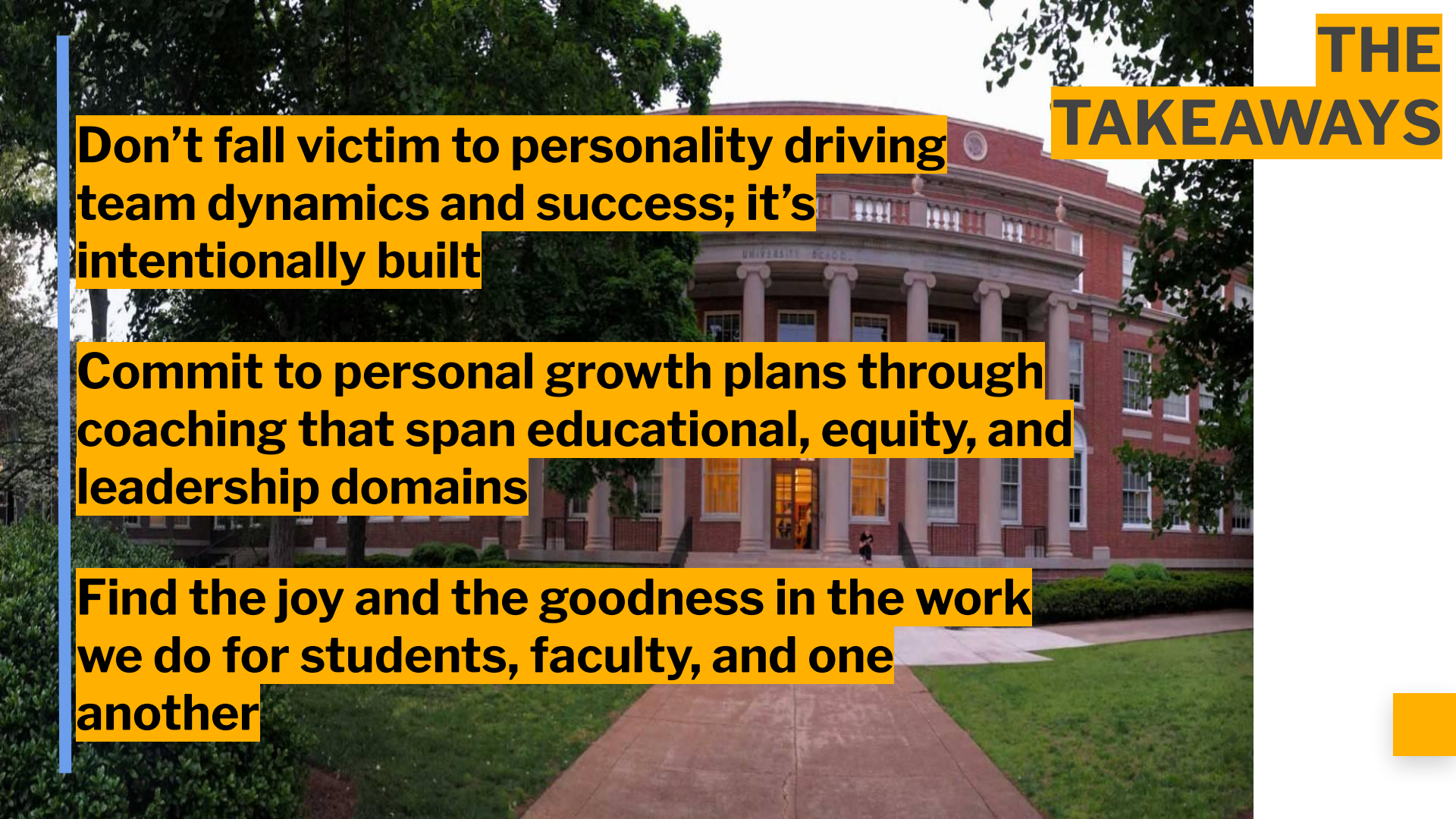


# THE TAKEAWAYS

**Don't fall victim to personality driving team dynamics and success; it's intentionally built**

**Commit to personal growth plans through coaching that span educational, equity, and leadership domains**

**Find the joy and the goodness in the work we do for students, faculty, and one another**







# Resources on Team Leadership

- [The Discipline of Teams -- Telling a Difference Between a Group and a Team \(HBR 1993\)](#)
  - [The Decision Book](#) (Krogerus, Tschappeler)
  - [Drexler-Sibbet Team Performance Model](#) (The Grove)
  - [Forbes's Five Characteristics of Highly Functioning Teams](#)
  - [How the Best Bosses Interrupt Bias on their Teams](#)
  - [Every Leader Needs to Navigate These Seven Tensions](#) (HBR)
  - [Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making](#) (Kaner)
  - [The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures](#) (McCandless, Lipmanowicz)
  - [Schools that Learn](#) (Senge)
  - [Embarrassment and the Emotional Underlife of Learning](#) (Newkirk)
  - Essentialism (McKeown)
  - [Failing to Learn and Learning to Fail](#) (Cannon)
  - [Wilderness Leadership](#) (HBR)
  - [SCARF Model](#) (Ancona)
  - [In Praise of the Incomplete Leader](#) (Ancona)
  - [Coaching Your Team as a Collective Makes it Stronger](#) (Siang and Canning)
  - [The Most Meaningful Way to Succeed is to help Others Succeed](#) (Grant)
  - [The Coherent Organization](#) (Jarche)
  - [A Guide to Building Psychological Safety on your Team](#) (Ravishankar)
  - [Long Range Planning Template](#)
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