For principals, the trick is knowing when to pass on the facilitator’s hat

Meetings are becoming teachers’ work, at least an important part of it, as evidence mounts that student improvement is higher and more sustainable in collaborative schools. In collaborative cultures, leaders wear four hats that they easily can pass to teachers—consultant, presenter, coach, and facilitator. When principals loan the facilitator hat to faculty members, they discover they have more influence and face less resistance on school decisions.

The facilitator efficiently coordinates staff energies by making meetings more successful. The principal frames the meeting and agenda items, including stating outcomes, giving a rationale for an item’s importance, clarifying the group’s function (to inform, recommend, or decide), linking an item to other school initiatives, or naming the givens, such as money, time, or other resources available to the group. A facilitator works within this framework to make easier the processes of planning, problem solving, and decision making, or in the case of dialogue, conversing to understand.

An effective facilitator is neutral, keeping personal opinions about meeting topics unsaid and concentrating instead on guiding group processes. If the principal wears this neutral hat, the group is robbed of the principal’s knowledge, values, and expertise. In many situations, the principal’s knowledge is an important resource to a group as it makes decisions affecting students’ learning. If the principal is facilitating the meetings, he or she may not be able to adequately communicate that knowledge and may send mixed messages. Teachers may conclude that the real agenda is to get buy-in to the principal’s ideas.

When to facilitate is a dilemma not only for principals, but for all those in positions of power. Bruce Wellman and I (1999) distinguish two types of positional authority: role authority, such as a principal or the vice principal when the principal is not present, department heads in department meetings, committee chairpersons, and superintendents or assistant superintendents when the superintendent is not present; and knowledge authority, such as science specialists in meetings on science curriculum or methodology or a special education specialist in a meeting about a student.

When the individual with role or knowledge authority participates in a meeting without a designated facilitator, this leader typically manages group processes. This person sets the agenda, decides when to move to the next topic, recognizes people to speak, writes meeting notes to assist remembering, and summarizes actions to be taken. Managing these many tasks limits or diffuses the leader’s attention to content and limits the group’s access to the leader’s specialized knowledge and points of view.

In the most successful meetings, leadership roles are shared, and all parties understand and agree to those roles. Initially this approach can raise tensions for both principals and faculty members.

Principals may need to examine their own issues about power and control: What does being in charge mean when you are not running the meeting? Leaders can begin to address the challenge of sharing leadership by asking other principals about how they let go and benefits they perceive. As a principal, I discovered I had more influence when staff members became skilled in running meetings. Let go of the reins in stages. Think about positively influencing the thinking of group members in ways that keep the focus on your ideas and information, not on the role of the person who is speaking.

A shift in meeting roles means teachers take on new responsibilities and relationships with colleagues. The change can be unsettling for some. Collaborative work requires acquiring new skills. Teachers first should isolate and learn some facilitation skills together that also are used in teaching: questioning, paraphrasing, probing for specificity. Faculty members develop confidence and competence by learning about the facilitation role, then taking turns facilitating and debriefing with colleagues. All of these changes affect the sociology of the group. Yet sharing the facilitator’s role empowers the group and makes a stronger team.

FACILITATION

Groups also should have full knowledge of what a
While a facilitator does not make known a preference for any of the solutions the group considers, no facilitator is truly neutral. But facilitators can be “substantively neutral” — giving no verbal or nonverbal cues of their personal reactions to the ideas being discussed. Since the facilitator serves the group, not individual members, displaying neutrality is important (Schwartz, 1994).

The facilitator's responsibilities include ensuring the following occur:

- Clarify the meeting's purpose. Is this a conversation to deepen understanding (dialogue) or to make decisions (discussion)?
- Clarify decision-making authority. Will the group decide, recommend, or inform?
- Determine if topics are within the group's sphere of influence and therefore appropriate to pursue.
- Establish which discussion tools to use.
- Check participants' understanding of task and processes.
- Manage the dynamics and traffic flow of the conversation.
- Push for closure.
- Press for specificity.
- Intervene to correct behaviors that will detract from the group's work or the capacity to get work done.
- Assist ongoing groups to reflect on and learn from their experience and become increasingly effective.

While groups may have information about what effective facilitators and group members do, using this information requires setting aside past practices without intimating that past practices were wrong.

**MAKING A CHANGE**

Sonya Wrisley, an intermediate school principal in Poway, Calif., writes, “A very significant learning for me is when to be a participant and when to be a facilitator. This will be difficult, as I love facilitating. But I understand clearly that when I facilitate, I give away my ability to express my knowledge, ideas, and beliefs” (personal communication, 2004).

Introducing the notion of a neutral facilitator to a group, and particularly introducing the idea that the leader serves the group best by not facilitating, takes some adjustment for members. Many leaders introduce the notion of a faculty member as facilitator in relationship to the larger ideas about meetings (Garmston, 2002).

Pat Monahan, a high school department chair in the Downers Grove (Ill.) district, found that introducing interactive meeting strategies and rotating the facilitator's role brought resistance, enthusiasm, mistakes, and successes. “Our efforts to restructure department meetings and modify our ways of talking together have not been easy,” he wrote (personal communication, 2002). “As a leader I had to let go, and our facilitators had to step up. Our success, I believe, was largely caused by our facilitators, who showed such courage and determination, even in the face of criticism. We realize that we have a long way to go to achieve the sense of unity we desire in our department, but we have learned a good deal in our first year and face the future with assurance.”

The results of taking on these changes are a greater percentage of meeting time focused on student learning, more cohesive initiation and follow-through on instructional refinements, and teachers who feel more efficacious, and thus work harder and succeed more often.

**REFERENCES**


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