

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

The 5 principles of successful meetings

BY ROBERT J. GARMSTON



Effective meetings require skilled group members.

Successful meetings have always existed, yet the pervasive memories of poor ones dominate the memory's palette, leading us, like Pavlov's dogs, to groan at the mere use of the word meeting. Yet meetings can be events in which educational communities learn, dialogue, plan, problem solve, monitor, and make decisions.

Effective meetings require more than skilled facilitators. Facilitation is important, as are sound agendas and functional physical surroundings. More important are skilled group members and the application of certain principles. Meeting success is influenced more by the collaborative norms of the group than by the knowledge and skills of a meeting facilitator (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

The principles of successful meeting are embodied in five standards:

1. Discuss only one topic at a time;
2. Use only one process at a time;
3. Achieve interactive and balanced participation;
4. Respect cognitive conflict by eliciting disagree-

Continued on p. 6

WHAT'S INSIDE

District Leadership

A provocative poster triggers a discussion.

PAGE 2

Focus on the NSDC

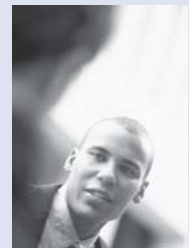
Standards
Build instructional leadership.

PAGE 3

From a Leader's Bookshelf

What leaders can do to close the knowing-doing gap.

PAGE 4



NSDC Tool

Three forms of paraphrasing.

PAGE 5



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Read the writing on the wall, and then act accordingly

“That’s an interesting poster you have there.” His deputy could tell by the way the superintendent said “interesting” that he wasn’t being entirely complimentary. “Provocative, isn’t it?” the deputy said as he turned and looked at the poster. (See box below.) “Well, that’s one way to describe it. Where did you get it?” “At that national conference I attended last week.”

“Why did you put it on your wall?”

“I’ve been thinking,” the deputy said.

“Oh, no, not again. Haven’t I warned you about that?”

The deputy knew that in spite of the superintendent’s smile, he was only half kidding. “Yes, but I’m incorrigible,” he replied.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” the superintendent said.

“What I mean is that I’ve been reviewing our approach to professional development, and I’m not sure we’re getting the most bang for our buck. We keep providing training but there doesn’t seem to be as much change in student performance as we would like. I wonder if we should consider another approach.”

The superintendent’s brow furrowed. “You mean something like the poster describes? That seems pretty radical. Won’t we lose control?”

“Won’t the schools and the teachers start going off in all kinds of different directions?”

“Not necessarily; we would still set the big agenda. But as it stands now we don’t seem to be very good at translating what we know into what teachers do. Maybe they never really ‘get it’ because the knowledge is ours, or that of some consultant, not theirs.”

“Well, what that poster describes is a pretty big leap.”

“Oh, I agree, but we don’t have to do it all overnight. I’m just worried that our professional development seems stagnant. We keep doing the same old thing because we know how to do it well and we’re comfortable with it, even though we don’t see many long-term results. Teachers and principals participate because they have to, not because they want to. They are resistant to learning even before they walk into the room. I wonder if it isn’t time to rethink our whole rationale and approach. Maybe we need to start moving in a more productive direction.”

“It seems pretty far out to me,” the superintendent said. “I want to know the practical implications of the phrases on that poster, and how we would apply them to ‘professional learning’ in *our* schools. I’m not agreeing this is the way to go, but it might stimulate some new thinking. Why don’t you make some copies of the poster’s text and use it to lead a discussion at the next cabinet meeting?”

The deputy had been down this road before. “Sure, I’d like to do that,” he replied, “but how will you introduce the discussion? People won’t speak up unless they know you want their honest thinking.”

“OK, I’ll stir the pot,” the superintendent said as he turned towards the door. He paused. “By the way, you might want to take that poster down before our school board member from the university sees it.”

MOST HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:

- takes place at school, not away from school;
- occurs daily, not occasionally;
- engages teams, not individuals;
- relies on discussion, not presentation;
- requires initiative, not passivity;
- stimulates thinking, not inattention;
- emphasizes creation, not replication;
- sparks investigation, not transmission;
- generates understanding, not confusion;
- produces ownership, not compliance;
- improves practice, not deception.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Principal development is Job One

I remember vividly a conversation with an incredible central office director about the important role the principal played in school improvement. She had crafted an exquisite district-based professional development program for teachers and was reluctant to move to a school-based effort because she knew many principals were not ready to assume the role required for effective school-based professional development. Yet, the research emphasizes that a primary function of district staff is to build the capacity of schools to initiate and manage improvement and change (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Leadership, according to the NSDC Standards for Staff Development, requires central office staff members to **provide professional learning experiences to enable principals to function as instructional leaders**. The concomitant school-based leadership is required to nurture a school culture and context that supports professional learning.

What do central office leaders do to create instructional leaders? First, they **create facilitated learning teams for principals in which they problem solve and learn together**. For principals to understand and value learning teams within their own schools, they need experience working within a learning team. Those learning teams attend to issues of instructional leadership, professional learning communities, and quality teaching — not crisis management. When trust is established, principals will begin to conduct problem-solving sessions — getting help and assistance from their peers as they learn to build powerful school communities. These teams will mirror what principals can anticipate will happen

in their own schools as they create learning teams. Thus, it is helpful for principals to experience this strategy *well in advance* of making those same changes at the school level.

Central office staff also **provide extensive, ongoing learning activities that include hands-on, problem-based, and multiple practice experiences**. Leadership is not only a knowledge base and a set of skills, it also involves a set of beliefs as well as underlying assumptions. Principals' professional learning

needs to include more than building a knowledge base. Many existing principals were trained to be *managers* rather than instructional leaders. Their practices are not going to change as a result of more information but rather through active experimentation and support.

Lastly, central office staff **provide time to explore and practice specific behaviors and strategies and receive feedback on the implementation**. Research on training has found that practice

and feedback is a powerful and essential component because it helps learners prepare to use new visible behaviors and also to practice the thinking behind those behaviors (Joyce & Showers, 1988). Principals need to develop the *invisible* cognitive skills which undergird their instructional leadership practices. Among the cognitive skills is an understanding and valuing of collaboration, professional learning communities, and job-embedded learning. They will understand each of these concepts when they have experienced them first-hand.

Ford Motor Co. used to say, "Quality is Job One!" Central office staff's Job One is the development of principals so they can serve as strong instructional leaders.

LEADERSHIP

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

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THE KNOWING-DOING GAP

“Knowledge must come through action.”
— Sophocles

I have long believed that most of us know more about teaching, leadership, and ways to improve schools than our actions demonstrate. Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton address this issue in *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000). “[O]ne of the great mysteries in organizational management,” they write, is “why knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge. We came to call this the *knowing-doing problem* (p. 4). They note that “research demonstrates that the success of most interventions designed to improve organizational performance depends largely on implementing what is already known rather than from adopting new or previously unknown ways of doing things” (p. 14).

Pfeffer and Sutton list numerous organizational processes that substitute for implementing new practices: making a decision to do something as if the decision itself were sufficient to bring about the change, writing a mission statement, engaging in planning, preparing written documents, making presentations and talking “smart” about the change, and so on. While each of these activities may have value, when they are viewed as sufficient in and of themselves, they become sources of the knowing-doing gap, the authors claim.

Here are other ideas from the book that I believe have important implications for school

system leaders:

- “[O]ne of the most important insights from our research is that knowledge that is actually implemented is much more likely to be acquired from learning by doing than from learning by reading, listening, or even thinking” (pp. 5-6).
- “[A]t one level, the answer to the knowing-doing problem is deceptively simple: Embed more of the process of acquiring new knowledge in the actual doing of the task and less in formal training programs that are frequently ineffective” (p. 27).
- “Attempting to copy [from other organizations] just *what* is done — the explicit practices and policies — without holding the underlying philosophy is at once a more difficult task and an approach that is less likely to be successful” (p. 24).
- “You’re likely to find talk substituting for action when no follow-up is done to ensure that what was said is actually done; people forget that merely making a decision doesn’t change anything; planning, meetings, and report writing become defined as ‘action’ that is valuable in its own right, even if it has no effect on what people actually do ...; complex language, ideas, processes, and structures are thought to be better than simple ones” (p. 54).
- “People and the organizations in which they work are often trapped by implicit theories of behavior that guide their decisions and actions. ... [O]ne of the most powerful interventions we have uncovered to free people from the unconscious power of implicit theory: making people think carefully about the assumptions implicit in the practices and interventions they are advocating. ... By bringing to the surface assumptions that are otherwise unconscious, interventions and decisions become much more mindful and incorporate what people know” (pp. 91-92).

BIG IDEA

Leaders can close the knowing-doing gap by surfacing assumptions, embedding learning in the process of doing, creating norms of interpersonal accountability, recognizing that talking about something or making a decision is not the same as doing it, and emphasizing the value of simplicity in language, ideas, and processes.

REFERENCE

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Three forms of paraphrasing

1. Acknowledge/clarify

A brief statement reflecting what was said in the listener's words.

- You're concerned about _____.
- You would like to see _____.
- You're pleased with _____.
- You're feeling badly about _____.
- You're trying to figure out _____.
- You know it can be _____.

2. Summarize/Organize

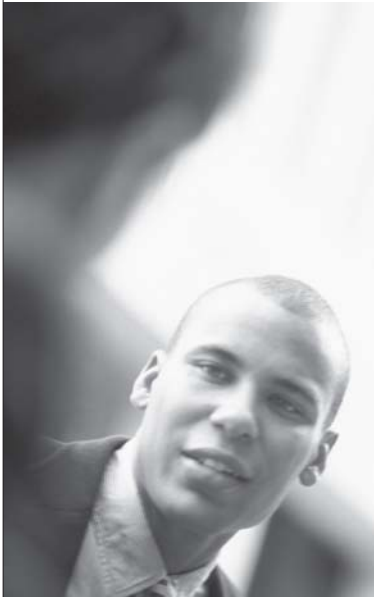
A statement illuminating themes or containers.

- You have two goals here; one is _____ and the other is _____.
- So, on the one hand _____, on the other hand _____.
- There seem to be three themes: 1) _____, 2) _____, and 3) _____.
- So we have a hierarchy of ideas here. It is _____.

3. Shift/conceptual focus

A statement reflecting ideas at a logical level difference.

- So a _____ here is _____.
- So a value here is _____.
- So an assumption here is _____.
- So a goal here is _____.
- So a belief here is _____.
- So a concept here is _____.
- So an intention here is _____.
- So a perspective here is _____.



Source: *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*, by Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. Christopher-Gordon, 1999. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, <http://store.nsd.org>.

The 5 principles of successful meetings

Continued from p. 1

ments and respecting other viewpoints; and
5. Have all understand and agree to meeting roles and responsibilities.

ONE TOPIC AT A TIME

One of the brightest groups of which I have been a member had a habit of putting kernels of ideas and topics in the air as if we were living in a popcorn machine. Meetings were exciting, but not productive. Finally, in frustration, we realized we were violating this very basic principle of effective group work and decided one of us would serve as facilitator in each meeting. Having adopted this standard, both the facilitator and group members can help the group stay on track. Either can offer a relevancy challenge: “Help us understand how your comment connects to this topic.” The typical response is either that it doesn’t fit and the speaker will save it for later, or an explanation of how it does connect. Listing the off-topic ideas on a wall chart respectfully holds the ideas in group memory so they are not lost.

ONE PROCESS AT A TIME

Like the first standard, this one is easily forgotten when group discussions become intense. In any meeting, multiple thinking styles are at work, and it is natural for members to examine topics with different approaches. When my wife and I have fiscal discussions, we have learned to name the process we will use, agree to it, and live by it until that phase of the conversation is done. Because we approach tasks differently, this is essential to effective technical conversations together and saves us from “process arguments” during our work.

In the same way, for a group to brainstorm effectively, all members need to be on the same page. During brainstorming, all ideas are accepted without comment, question, or challenge. To ensure this, the facilitator uses a strategy called PAG/PAU. In the first phase, Process As Given, she carefully describes the process, then states what to do and what not to do. “If you have a question or criticism during brainstorming, hold on to it. We will hear it

later.” Then the facilitator checks group members’ understanding. During this Process As Understood phase, she queries the group. “So, what are your ground rules? How much time will this take? What will you do if you have a question or criticism?” With PAG/PAU, the facilitator has psychological permission from the group to intervene should any process agreements be forgotten.

INTERACTIVE MEETINGS

The most heroic of group members will begin to lose information in short-term memory without interaction with ideas. The most effective groups use processes learned in classrooms to keep members engaged and thoughtfully productive. Any meeting that runs beyond 20 to 30 minutes without members being directed to turn to a neighbor and talk is probably burning out brain cells.

In our work with Adaptive Schools, Bruce Wellman and I have described 50 meeting strategies that accomplish this and other meeting purposes (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). In one strategy, members turn to one another and summarize the most important point of the preceding discussion. In another strategy, pairs identify concerns about a topic before general discussion begins. In yet another, subgroups read and discuss a policy statement to identify topics for full group discussion.

PRODUCTIVE COGNITIVE CONFLICT

Groups that discuss substantive differences of opinion produce better decisions, increased commitment, cohesiveness, and follow-through than groups who lack this “cognitive conflict” (Amason, et al., 1995). Bruce Wellman and I have found that even groups with histories of directing anger at individuals rather than ideas can learn to set aside this “affective conflict” and develop ways of talking respectfully to individuals while disagreeing vigorously with their ideas.

The importance of cognitive conflict cannot be overstressed. Good groups disagree gracefully about ideas. They have norms and tools that allow full expression of differences, examina-

Continued on p. 8

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Misconceptions about meetings

By Robert Garmston and Jane Ellison

10. Everyone should be present and seated before the session starts.

Start on time — regardless of who's in the room. Use interactive activities that make participants think about their prior knowledge regarding today's issues. For example, have subgroups report concerns about the first agenda topic, prime a discussion with an activity that releases feelings and creative thinking such as having subgroups complete a stem — “developing assessment criteria will be like what ethnic food because _____,” — or have pairs talk about ideas that should be brought forward from the last meeting. Soon, being on time becomes the norm.

9. A meeting is the place to read a memo to the group.

Meetings are to process information, not receive information. Test whether an information item needs to be on the agenda by the degree to which the group needs to talk about it to understand or implement it effectively.

8. What's urgent has priority over what's important.

There is always a fire. Performing as a fire crew avoids items that are difficult to address. If meeting agendas are mostly about reducing heat or fighting flames, ask what must happen to schedule items about student learning on the agenda.

7. Furniture arrangement and space don't matter.

They matter a lot. Meeting space must be “just right” to provide comfort, visual focus, and interaction opportunities. Members must be able to see one another, be able to

move around and speak with different people when energy lags, the content is detailed and dense, or the group needs consensus. Facilitators should stand, unless it is a very small group. Post recording sheets on walls to serve as a group memory.

6. The facilitator is solely responsible for a meeting's success.

Concentrate on developing group members, not just facilitators by teaching group members their responsibilities and five meeting standards. (See main article.)

Encourage group members to ask “naive” questions like, “How much detail do we need to move this item?” or “Which process are we using now?” Teach members to be engaged, proactive participants.

5. Not much can be done about group members who are silent, vocally dominant, or negative.

Facilitators or group members can redirect unproductive behavior. Interventions should be simple, take little time, be done in a way that promotes group learning and addresses an idea, the group, or an individual. *Adaptive Schools: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) details a range of intervention principles and strategies.

4. Because everyone has been in the meeting, there's no need for verbal closure.

People may hear and understand decisions differently. Have pairs rehearse what they might say to others about the meeting and check for alignment.

3. Meeting time should be devoted to topics, rather than reflection, processing, or group development.

Any group too busy to reflect on its work is too busy to improve. Routine self-assessments help groups become more effective over time. Routinely assessing the five meeting standards (see main article), however, can almost guarantee meetings that produce maximum work in minimum time with maximum member satisfaction.

2. The more items on an agenda, the more will be accomplished.

Use the rule of one-half. As you plan a meeting, list agenda items and then find alternate ways to address at least half of them. Block enough time for the remaining items for the group to understand, deliberate, and decide.

1. A meeting, unlike a lesson, can be done without planning.

Meeting design turns out to be the No. 1 mechanism for effective meetings. For each agenda item, help the group be clear about goals, processes, and functions. Label items on the agenda with an action: (1) respond in order to clarify, inform, or advocate; (2) dialogue to deepen understanding; (3) recommend; or (4) decide. Envision the processes groups will use and allot enough time.

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The 5 principles of successful meetings

Continued from p. 6
tions of assumptions and mental models underlying different points of view, and resolution techniques that provide for “best possible” resolutions to arise. They produce better results. Ineffective groups either avoid conflict and live with poor decisions made by the leader or the most vocal member of the group, or personalize conflict and create a host of negative factors like apathy, balkanization, decreased commitment to the group’s purposes, and, always, poor decisions.

UNDERSTAND AND AGREE ON ROLES

The most influential role in any group is the group member. Skilled members who know meeting standards and group processes are able to work in harmony across differences to get the greatest value from meeting time. Most groups engaged in decision making, planning, or problem solving need a facilitator and someone doing public recording. Most often, one group member is a decision maker — that is a

person of role authority like a principal, or of knowledge authority like a specialist in whatever topic is being discussed. The least effective use of these people’s time is in the facilitation role. This robs the group of the valuable knowledge they have to contribute to topics.

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