

THE CITIZEN FACILITATOR CAN KEEP A SMALL GROUP MOVING TOWARD A GOAL

The purpose of collaborating is to achieve collective results that participants would be unable to accomplish working alone. Expected outcomes include shared objectives, a sense of urgency and commitment, a sense of belonging, open communication, mutual trust and respect, realizing complementary diverse skills and knowledge, intellectual agility, interdependence in framing goals and approaches, and individual latitude in carrying out a design the group arrived at jointly.

The levels of complexity, interdependence, skills, maturity, and leadership required to attain this level of collaboration are staggering. Clearly, arriving at real collaboration does not simply happen by forming a group, especially in school cultures that value and support independence over interdependence. Yet forming a group is the first step, and working with the group as it exists while maintaining a vision of the group as it may become is the second and most important step.

Three aspects are necessary for small-group collaboration in schools:

- Administrator clarity about the intention of working collaboratively;
- An understanding of group members' roles and responsibilities; and
- The role of what I term a "citizen" facilitator.

I worked recently with an elementary school in which grade-level teams met one hour a week to focus on instructional improvement. In each team, one teacher was designated the facilitator. Each team's charge was to set annual grade-level goals, develop units, plan lessons, and assess student work results. Yet midyear, the teams were struggling. Many teachers were frustrated. Some teams had developed three goals for the year; some, none; some, one. They were good people, smart teachers with time and resources, yet they were floundering. Why?

UNCLEAR INTENTION

Knowledge, skills, resources, and willingness to work together are important prerequisites for success. Yet inten-

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tions are even more important. Intentions are also more important than goals. Intention, from the Latin *intendere* — to stretch toward, to aim at — is an act of will. In bioenergetics, for example, just by having an intention though not actually willing one's body to move, one's body responds in alignment with the intention. Within intention are nested the more pedestrian questions of goals, responsibilities, tasks, and timelines. When intentions are clear, answers to these questions become obvious and self-generated. It is the principal's role to help see that group members understand clearly the intentions for the collaborative work.

The school in my example began its collaborative work without clear intentions. Of course, student improvement is a goal, but how does collaborative work help them toward this end? The school leadership established structures, roles, times for the group to collaborate, and a menu of tasks on which to work. These are valuable resources to help meet goals, but none answers the questions of what to do first or how much time to spend developing, implementing, or assessing goals, or where to focus members' energy.

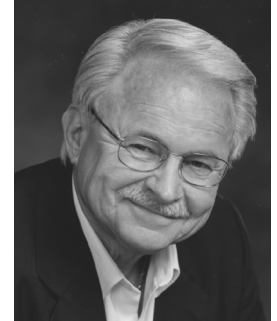
An administrator could provide teams with an agenda of tasks and processes that would answer these questions, save time, get faster focus, and help teams work more expediently. But giving people a prescription for work violates the very essence of collaboration — productive invention.

In conversations with facilitators, other administrators, and me, the principal began to articulate her intention in having groups work together — to make teaching decisions based on systemic inquiries into the relationships between teaching and student learning.

In a sense, this is job-embedded professional development supporting continuing cycles of improvement in which the constant focus of conversations is student work and learning events. This intention is broad, yet focused enough to inform facilitator and team decisions about how and where to focus their energy.

THE GROUP MEMBER ROLE

In any session in which planning, reflecting, or problem solving occur, the engaged participants — or group members — do the work of the meeting. In fact, the meeting's success depends more on their informed participation



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about how to create collaborative work environments that result in improved student learning. His columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

than the skills and knowledge of a boss, a content expert, or a facilitator. This is especially so in small work teams. In large groups, a facilitator is required to orchestrate and direct group members' contributions.

Group members should be able to distinguish between data and inference; distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, claims, or reasons; identify unstated assumptions; and interpret data. Additionally, skilled group members pay attention to the group's processes. They:

- Monitor their own and others' adherence to meeting standards;
- Seek and provide data;
- Clarify decision-making processes and levels of group authority;
- Open the door for others to speak;
- Call for dialogue; and
- Test consensus.

These behaviors are even more important when the individual is a member of a small work group.

THE CITIZEN FACILITATOR FOR SMALL GROUPS

To facilitate means to "make easier." A professional facilitator is one who conducts a meeting in which the purpose may be dialogue, shared decision making, planning, or problem solving. The facilitator directs the procedures to be used in the meeting, choreographs the energy within the group, and maintains a focus on one content and one process at a time (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

In small groups in which the person facilitating also has a voice in the conversation, this definition is incomplete. I have begun to distinguish between a "professional" facilitator — one who facilitates larger groups or groups in which the facilitator's voice is not required — and "citizen" facilitators, in which the thinking of the group would be incomplete without the facilitator's voice. The grade-level groups in the school in my example ranged from four to seven members. In such small groups, classic descriptions of facilitators break down. The admonition to be content-neutral, for example, or the value of standing to maintain role clarity are bedeviled by being a member of a small group in which the facilitator's ideas need to be part of the whole.

A citizen facilitator designated for the life of the group

or for a semester or longer has three responsibilities:

- To serve as a two-way conduit between team and principal, informing the team of principal priorities and requests, and the principal about group ideas and recommendations;
- To serve as professional developer to the group, providing foundation knowledge about group processes, distinctions between dialogue and discussion, and tools for conversing, planning, and problem solving;
- To be the person in the group who maintains a macroperspective, using helicopter viewing to anticipate and assess periods when members are stuck or fatigued, and to be the person to initiate processes to get energy and information flowing again.

Rather than having a neutral facilitator, the intention in citizen-facilitated meetings is to have facilitated conversations. If the designated facilitator will be an active voice within the room, then the group itself must take on the knowledge and skill base of facilitator. It is imperative that group members acquire this knowledge, for in a small group led by a citizen facilitator, group members will want to suggest approaches to the group's work, take on charting responsibilities, or remind the group to get on task.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The best teams frequently fail because they work at the edge of their competence. When they fail, they fail forward, applying situational learning to future work. The school I worked with developed shared understanding about the intention for grade-level meetings and, in the process, developed insights about the role of the citizen facilitator and group member roles.

Schools must provide training for teachers to effectively assume collaborative roles. To require collaboration without helping individuals develop the skills to do so is tantamount to malpractice.

Tasks of the citizen facilitator

- Develops the agenda either before the meeting or with the group.
- Opens the meeting.
- Achieves role clarification for self and for members who may periodically and informally rise to facilitate or record.
- Describes the task as a product — something the group will see or hear when done.
- Calls on others to start the conversation.
- Engages in conversation as appropriate.
- Protects processes, especially one topic and one process at a time.
- Watches for and initiates transitions.
- Asks who will do what by when.
- Calls for meeting assessment.
- Closes meeting.

REFERENCE

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1999). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon. ■