RIGHT WAY TO BEGIN DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW

Sally Oxenberry was asked to facilitate the leadership team that meets weekly at her middle school and to help develop a spirit of collaboration. The school staff is organized into teams of five or six people. Oxenberry works with the team leaders. She had modeled collaborative practices such as paraphrasing but didn't know what other skills to teach and in what sequence.

"It's all such good stuff, but where do I begin?" she asked (personal communication, 2006). "I feel that we need to do dialogue and ways of talking before going any further; however, I also feel we can learn so much from the seven norms of collaboration."

The overarching rationale for changing the work culture to become more collaborative is culture's impact on learning. By melding an understanding that culture affects learning with a research-based vision of ways faculties interact to improve student learning, leaders can make a significant impact on achievement. In this column, I will explore how attention to creating a collaborative culture can improve curriculum and student learning. Curriculum, as used here, is meant to convey the system, which addresses what is taught, how it is taught, and the mechanisms by which it is assessed.

Oxenberry's dilemma is common. No one right way exists to develop collaborative cultures capable of improving student learning. Leaders start with rationale, or successful experiences of authentic dialogue, or introduce communication skills and structures for inquiry. Where to begin depends on context, understanding the dynamics of the group, and intuition, but all require leadership.

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LEADERSHIP

Leaders who learn publicly are continuing inquirers, confident enough that they can reveal their own thinking in progress, are genuinely curious, and are provocateurs of

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collaborative cultures. They successfully promote high expectations, a spirit of inquiry, and an unwavering focus on learning for both students and adults.

In one urban system in which I work, the associate superintendent tells groups, "We are failing our kids." This reason and test data are the motivators she offers to groups to continuously develop capacities for collaboration focused on learning. She knows that to affect student learning, groups must "engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions that investigate the relationships between instructional practices and student work" (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

Leaders at all levels — principals, department heads, grade-level leaders, and others — can develop the communication capacities necessary to function as professional learning communities. They provide time and space for groups to meet and talk, encourage talk about substantive topics related to learning, and introduce protocols that make it safe to talk about difficult-to-discuss topics and skills.

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.nsdc.org.

ONE WAY TO START

One place to begin to develop communication skills needed for effective collaboration is with the seven norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Norms are important because they are the foundation tools with which groups can dialogue, engage productively in conflict, discuss and decide, invent and problem solve. Each time I have observed a member of a group, a grade-level team, a department, or an advisory group paraphrase spontaneously, I have witnessed a watershed experience that makes all further conversations more efficient and effective.

Taken at face value, these norms seem simple and perhaps not worth faculty attention. Most adults believe they know most of these skills. But there is an enormous difference between declaring one knows how to use a skill and skillfully, habitually using the skill in work conversations. These seven practices are skills that transform to norms when they become habits in a group. Norms signal expected behavior. Two payoffs occur when a practice becomes a norm: Because members are conscious of the behavior, they voluntarily monitor both themselves individually and

the group; and norms inform and shape the behaviors of new members. The seven norms of collaboration are:

Promote a spirit of inquiry: Learning is, at its root, a questioning process. True collaboration requires questioning one's own and others' thinking.

Pause: Pausing before responding or asking a question allows group members time to think and enhances dialogue, discussion, and decision making.

Paraphrase: Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you: "So ..." or "As you are ..." or "You're thinking ..." and following the starter with a paraphrase helps members of the group hear and understand each other as they formulate decisions.

Probe: Using gentle open-ended probes or inquiries such as "Please say more ..." or "I'm curious about ..." increases the clarity and precision of the group's thinking.

Put ideas on the table: Ideas are the heart of a meaningful dialogue. Label the intention of your comments. For example, you might say, "Here is one idea ..." or "One thought I have is ..." or "Here is a possible approach ..."

Pay attention to oneself and others: Meaningful dialogue is facilitated when each group member is conscious of himself or herself and of others and is aware of not only what he or she is saying, but also how it is said and how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning style when planning for, facilitating, and participating in group meetings. Responding to others in their own language forms is one manifestation of this norm.

Presume positive intentions: Assuming that others' intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and eliminates unintentional put-downs. Verbalizing supposed positive intentions is one manifestation of this norm.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

After introducing the norms, use self-assessment inventories, such as the one above, to monitor meetings and enroll group members to learn and apply the norms. Additional detailed inventories can be found at www.adaptiveschools.com/sevennorms.htm. These inventories help with introducing norms and determining which to work on first. For example, one inventory focuses on "me," the degree to which I put ideas on the table and so on. Another assesses "we," the degree to which the group puts ideas on the table and so on.

To select a common norm to focus on, assign one "we" inventory to groups of four to assess the behaviors of the entire group. Gather the results and display the data so the full group can see each subgroup's ratings. Next, facilitate a conversation about the results: "Help us understand what you were paying attention to that generated a rating of 2 on that norm." This talk brings to the surface what already

Norms of collaboration:
Assessing consistency in a group or key work setting

1. Promoting a spirit of inquiry
   Low •   • High

2. Pausing
   Low •   • High

3. Paraphrasing
   Low •   • High

4. Probing
   Low •   • High

5. Putting ideas on the table and pulling them off
   Low •   • High

6. Paying attention to self and others
   Low •   • High

7. Presuming positive intentions
   Low •   • High

exists. The first step in improvement is awareness.

Engage the group in describing what that norm would look and sound like in meetings. Then monitor the use of the norm frequently, because what is inspected is expected. "How are we doing on our norm during this meeting? What might we want to acknowledge, and what might we want to pay more attention to?"

Ad hoc groups will sometimes invite members to suggest "group norms." While this practice can be helpful, there are distinctions between these types of norms and the seven norms of collaboration. Group-generated norms most often are conceptual, such as a norm requesting "respectful listening" or "freedom from attack." They are easy to agree to, but it is difficult to ascertain whether the norm is being followed. I refer to these as "behavior agreements." The seven norms, for the most part, are stated behaviorally, but are more precise and can be monitored.

Develop the norms of collaboration for more than meetings. These norms are useful to spread throughout all the conversations in the school. As collaboration in conversation develops, a collaborative culture begins to form. And culture affects learning.

REFERENCES

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