MEMBERS SKILLED IN QUESTIONING TECHNIQUE CAN KEEP THE GROUP WORK ON TRACK

Professional communication lies at the heart of getting work done in schools. Educators communicate informally within and across disciplines, grade levels, departments, and schools. They talk in pairs and trios, in discussions that are spontaneous or planned. Through communication, teachers work to improve instructional practice and performance. They communicate to clarify policies, identify and address problems and priorities, and monitor achievement. Faculties communicate in their work together to respond to the changing needs of students, standards, and curriculum demands. Through communication, groups manage differences and cultures evolve — or stay the same. In schools, one primary vehicle for communication is meetings.

Meetings have a greater effect on organizational success than we might think. They are the bedrock of successful learning communities.

First, effective and time-efficient meetings produce work important to students.

Second, well-conducted meetings promote member satisfaction, capacity to collaborate, and therefore willingness to conscientiously contribute.

Third, the more groups are successful at getting important work done in meetings, the greater their collective efficacy, a resource undeniably linked to student success (Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, 2006). Finally, members of successful groups ultimately become members and leaders elsewhere and enrich the quality of work within the school and district.

For these reasons, knowing how to produce work through meetings has become an essential part of an educator's professional portfolio, regardless of his or her role.

Ultimately, skillful group members influence meeting success more than a strong facilitator does. Fundamental to meeting effectiveness is the intention members share that meetings be worth their — and their students'— time as well as the knowledge that they can make a difference toward ensuring that meetings meet this standard.

This column describes how members use a technique called naïve questions combined with three meeting struc-

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tures to keep the group on track. The group's work may be studying measures of student achievement, inventing and testing instructional approaches, assessing their results, and planning, implementing, and assessing again in a continuous cycle of inquiry and improvement.

NAIVE QUESTIONS

A teacher from a large urban district complained about attending 30 years of dysfunctional meetings. After learning about naïve questioning, she realized that as a group member, she could make a difference. She began to ask naïve questions and was amazed at the power she held to get meetings on track.

Asking a naïve question is one way that group members effectively offer correction to group work. To communicate naïvely is to speak with innocence, to be artless, unaffected, and neutral. Naïve questions have an intonational quality of child-like inquiry, posing questions that are truly open-ended. "Who will communicate this decision?" and "Who will be informed about this?" are examples of naïve questions. They develop awareness about process and alert leaders who may have overlooked such questions in planning.

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.

SUCCESS STRUCTURES

The term "structure" describes a system of order and organization. Since any group brings a variety of mental models, cognitive styles, personal histories, and individual agendas to its work, the potential for chaotic interaction always exists. Providing structures permits a full and focused expression of these differences in a manner that is useful to the group's work.

Following are three structures that can make groups more effective. (A fourth structure, managing meeting enviroments, is also critical.) Each of the following addresses a significant question in a group's work life.
1. Who decides?
2. What topics are ours?
3. What are the meeting standards?

WHO DECIDES?

Using this structure, the group determines who makes the decision related to the issue under discussion. Will the decision maker(s) be certain individuals within the group, the group as a whole, the person who convened the group,

or even some person or group(s) not present at this meeting? Groups are most effective and productive when they are clear about whether their role is to inform others who are making a decision, recommend a choice, or decide themselves.

Trust is diminished when groups are not clear about who makes the final decision and what decision-making processes will be used. When members lose trust, groups can experience second-guessing, resistance, or lengthy and unproductive process arguments. This robs time and, more important, saps group energy, efficacy, and motivation to persevere on important topics. Some naïve questions group members might ask about decision-making authority and processes are:

- "Who is making this decision?"
- "What processes will we use?"
- "What is our role in this decision?
- "Are we to inform, recommend, or decide?"

WHICH TOPICS ARE OURS?

Whose turf are we on — yours or ours? All groups have interests that intersect with other groups' turf and decision-making authority. Groups must take into account coordination, effectiveness, and politics to honor overlapping areas of concern. Individual and collective vigilance to what lies within and outside the group's influence is an essential ingredient of group success. At some time in every group's history, this structure becomes important to departments, curriculum task forces, advisory groups, grade-level teams, site councils, and faculties.

An issue many schools address is who should be responsible for decisions about policy and practices on student discipline. This seems like a simple question, yet it relates to turf. Even the briefest conversation will reveal that the group must explore several related questions. Within the classroom or the school? In what areas — gum or guns? Within what parameters — state law or district policies? At what level of authority — unilaterally or in consultation with the principal or parents? Some questions group members might ask are:

- "Should we be talking about this?"
- "What parts of this issue live on our turf?"
- "What other stakeholders are involved?"
- "What are the roles of other groups in making decisions about this topic?"
- "What limitations, if any, are we bound by?"

WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS?

Standards are agreements for ways of working together (Garmston, 2002). Although each group is responsible for deciding what standards will guide its work, Bruce Wellman and I (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) advocate

starting with the following set of standards. Wherever we have seen these standards in place, we have witnessed successful meetings: maximum accomplishment, minimum time, and maximum member satisfaction. Additionally, when effective groups implement these standards, their levels of efficiency, efficacy, craftsmanship, and satisfaction soar. When ineffective groups adopt them, their productivity improves. Four standards with sample naïve questions appear below.

- **One topic at a time:**
  Talk about one subject at a time to maintain coherence.
  "Excuse me, I thought we were talking about X. Are we on to a new topic now?"
- **One process at a time:**
  Groups lose time and confusion reigns when they jump from one process, such as brainstorming, to another, such as dialogue, without completing the former.
  "What process are we using now? I've lost track."
  "Are we done brainstorming?"
- **Balance participation:**
  Encourage all voices. Diversity of perspective forms stronger ideas.
  "Sally, I don't think we've heard from you. Anything to add?"
  "Can we take a couple of minutes to buzz on this?"
- **Engage cognitive conflict:**
  Disagreement about ideas is necessary for sound decisions.
  "I see it a different way."
  "Here is another idea." (Instead of "Yes, but!")

Knowing and using naïve questions are two different matters. The urban teacher in the example above decided to risk injecting questions into the meeting and was delighted with the results. What will it take in your group for teachers to feel empowered in this regard? A good start is to convince members that meeting success is more dependent on their informed participation than the skills and knowledge of a boss, a content expert, or a facilitator. Because you know the players and the history and context of your group, you can find a way.

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