

THE COLLABORATIVE COMPACT

OPERATING PRINCIPLES LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

By Robert J. Garmston and Diane P. Zimmerman

The meeting was finished, and some teachers lingered. We had just completed grade-level revisions on writing rubrics. One teacher said, “I wish all collaboration could be this effective. We got so much done!” From a collaborative standpoint, the meeting had been a success. The group stayed focused, all teachers had had a voice, they had accomplished what was expected and learned more about writing through conversation with peers. Most importantly, they left renewed and excited about working to improve learning.

In contrast, leaders often have common complaints about managing meetings and feel thwarted by attempts to collaborate. The list of complaints is exhaustive. They complain about the intrusion of technology, lack of focus, rudeness, conflicts, low engagement, and more. When teachers report on collaborative experiences, the list becomes the flipside of the same problem. Teachers feel that time spent on collaboration is often wasted because of poor meeting management. Many times, the agendas contain topics of low interest, a few people dominate the conversation, some become emotional or defensive, and often colleagues are off task.



Because time is the educator's most valuable asset, a moral imperative is that all leaders pay attention to and guarantee excellent facilitation (Garmston, 2012) and appropriate interventions (Garmston & Zimmerman, in press). When leaders know how to facilitate with elegance and intervene to maintain engagement, they teach by example and create smart collaborators. Accordingly, group members learn to be facilitative participants — to manage their own behavior and support their colleagues in thinking together. They are able to transfer these skills to collaboration with others in any context, including the classroom.

Leaders can accelerate collaboration by creating collaborative compacts. A collaborative compact is a set of accords about how a group will function. Collaborative compacts ought to focus on four areas of agreement: How we work together, how we think together, how we work with conflicts, and how we manage our own behavior. What follows here is an example of a collaborative compact that includes examples of what might be included. Leaders are encouraged to use this as a starting place and, over time, customize the compact based on issues that are pertinent to each group. This example includes a rationale and suggested interventions, but these would not be part of a final compact. A collaborative compact must be developed through collaboration, and we offer this extra information to start the dialogue.

GETTING STARTED

Begin with a conversation about collaborative work — what pleases or discourages the group — and how

★ **How we agree to work together, p. 12**

★ **How we agree to think together, p. 13**

★ **How we work with conflicts, p. 14**

★ **How we manage our own behavior, p. 16**

participants would like to agree to improve their level of collaboration. Suggest the group consider a collaborative compact, not as a set of rules, but as principles that might guide their work. Have pairs read and comment to one another about the ideas. Talk about the ideas as a full group, and determine what they would like in their own compact that can be committed to print.

Collaboration is not something that just happens. Collaboration is worth striving for. It is built out of the experience of humankind in our day-to-day push for honest, authentic interactions and a commitment to be responsible collaborators. When groups find this space, they experience dignity, power, and renewal.

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HOW WE AGREE TO WORK TOGETHER

These agreements comprise a set of standards about how group members are going to interact with one other. These would take the place of a more formal compact, such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, useful for preventing chaos in formal meetings, but inappropriate to support creative thinking in collaborative work groups.

Meeting standards:

- Group members discuss only one topic at a time.
- Members use only one process at a time.
- Participation in the meeting is balanced.
- Conflict about ideas is encouraged, but affective conflict is eliminated.
- Group members understand and agree on meeting roles — typically, facilitator, recorder, group member, and person with role or knowledge authority (Garmston & Wellman, 2009).

Rationale: In a seminal work, Michael Doyle and David Straus (1976) investigated the question: *What is the minimum number of meeting standards a group must follow to be on task, take minimum time to reach objectives, and achieve high levels of satisfaction?* They identified the above list, which is an appropriate starting place for all groups.

Intervention: Use this list for reflection about the success of the collaboration. Ask the group to evaluate each standard on a scale of 1 to 5 and use the data to improve collaborative practices (Garmston, 2012).

Working agreements:

- Demonstrate mutual respect: Be hard on ideas and soft on people.
- Listen to understand: Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Use paraphrases to communicate understanding and inquire before advocating. Paraphrasing is an essential attribute of smart groups, enabling them to solve complex problems (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).
- Be present: Eliminate personal distractions and participate.
- Check in with silence: When group members seem disengaged, check in with them by asking what they are thinking or feeling.

Rationale: These agreements are best developed in collaboration by asking group members to identify unproductive behaviors that they would like to eliminate from meetings. When participants start with their own problems and turn them into positive assets, the agreements become personal, meeting the unique needs of the group.

Intervention: Structure periodic self-reflection to allow group members to develop, refine, and make habitual their skills of self-observation and analysis. Because educators always have more tasks than time, many task-oriented groups resist this notion at first. Eventually they realize any group that is too busy to reflect on its work is too busy to improve.

HOW WE AGREE TO THINK TOGETHER

The true work of collaboration is to enter the zone of deep thinking, where participants are engaged, thoughtful, and articulate in their commitment to learn together (Zimmerman, 2013).

- **Signal thinking time:** Set aside topics of administrative trivia and focus instead on students, curriculum, and assessment. Despite members' best efforts, the mundane creeps into meetings. Therefore, it is important to signal thinking time when participants put away distractions and focus on the topic.
- **Clear focus:** Individual group members need to monitor their own focus, and, when it starts to wane, consider options for intervention, such as changing their mental state, using a clarifying paraphrase or question, observing processes, or by noting that it might be time for a transition.
- **Develop sufficient consensus:** Work to understand all views, distinguish between dialogue and discussion, give each person an equal voice, and seek at least 75% agreement to constitute consensus.

Rationale: David Bohm (1990) distinguishes between discussion and dialogue. Bohm describes discussion like a Ping-Pong game in which ideas bounce around, never coalescing. When paraphrasing and questioning are used judiciously, the conversation slows down and shifts to dialogue, becoming a container for building shared understanding (Williamson & Zimmerman, 2009). According to Bohm, dialogue groups create a “stream of meaning” — a deeper understanding that creates a group identity around a shared vision or mission.

Intervention: When individuals simultaneously engage in dialogue and discussion — an unproductive time for participants — a member can call attention to the inconsistency, helping the group refocus. A member might say, “I notice that we are repeating ideas, and I think we are ready to make a transition. I am ready for the group to summarize where we think we are to see if we are ready to move on.”

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HOW WE WORK WITH CONFLICTS

Groups cannot get to true collaboration unless they know how to tackle contentious issues and work with conflicts as a creative source. Some groups tend toward pseudo-community, in which conflicts are minimized or swept under the rug. These groups make poor decisions that are rarely carried out. Groups with healthy interchanges about conflicting ideas and perspectives make sound decisions that groups commit to. This is a hallmark of true collaboration.

- **Know your relationship to conflict:** When group members reflect on their reaction to conflict — going internal, joining the argument, or seeking creative tension — they begin to understand how their behavior can inadvertently contribute to or even escalate the conflict.
- **State the conflict:** Giving a hot button a name frames the conflict as a thing, allowing the group to be tough on ideas, not on people.
- **Summarize viewpoints:** Groups tend to overwork a conflict. Ask a few of the more silent participants to summarize viewpoints to allow the entire group to gain clarity and know what next steps to take.
- **Agree to disagree:** When members know where they disagree, they can more coherently communicate about issues and often are surprised to eventually find common ground.

Rationale: Chadwick (2010) found that groups work through conflicts when opposing sides state their issues and then create common statements on which they agree.

Intervention: Provide tightly structured processes that focus conversation and provide psychological safety, allowing members to articulate hard-to-talk-about topics. Even one enlightened group member can change the flow by saying something like, “There seem to be two camps on this debate. One group favors censoring student choice, the other favors free choice. I would like to pause and ask the group to summarize the key issues.”

HOW WE MANAGE OUR OWN BEHAVIOR

Each person in a meeting is responsible for his or her own behavior, while also being mindful how he or she responds in context. For example, one vociferous group member candidly stated, “I talk more because so many of you are silent. It makes me crazy when participants are silent.”

- **Honesty:** If a group member plans to go to the parking lot and complain, he or she needs to be honest with the group and speak up. This four-step complete messages sequence can help (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1983):

1. **Express observations.** “I notice that out of the group of 15, only three people are carrying on the conversation.”
2. **Express thoughts.** “I think this might be because some of us do not want to get into conflict.”
3. **Express feelings.** “I am concerned that we are wasting time and will leave here with a false sense of agreement.”
4. **Express needs.** “I suggest we stop the debate and summarize the various viewpoints, and then figure out what the group needs next.”

- **Care enough to stay focused:** If the agenda topic is not personally meaningful, commit to help the group with process interventions (Garmston & Zimmerman, in press). This can be a great gift to the group.

- **Personal commitment:** Successful collaboration inspires commitment. Each participant is responsible for making those commitments public so that the group is accountable.

Rationale: When participants speak from emotion, they often do not give enough information to help one another understand their state of mind. Stating observations, paired with the emotion, followed by stating needs, clears up many misunderstandings. Likewise, if participants really do not care about the topic, they sometimes choose the most expedient solution.

“Satisficing” is a strategy of expediency that works well for nonessential decisions but creates blind spots for more complex decisions. This strategy is more common than most of us would like to think. Many will adopt the first solution suggested by a group member to just get the job done. While this may be efficient in some circumstances, it is ineffective for groups that seek shared meanings and a common language. Satisficing short-circuits the conversation and assumes all agree, when, in reality, the only agreement was complicity to rush to a solution.

Intervention: When group members are honest about their own level of personal engagement, they can offer to play another role. For example, a teacher might say, “I do not have a lot of interest in the topic today. To keep me focused, I would like to offer to facilitate and use paraphrasing to summarize our ideas. Is that OK with the group?”