

# THE LEADING Teacher

## Inside

- A road not always taken, p. 2
- Differentiated coaching, p. 3
- The polarity map, pp. 6-7

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Finding your voice

### IN FACILITATING PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

By Valerie von Frank

**L**earning to lead a meeting is more than just managing agendas. It means reading the group's mood and stepping in at the right moment to turn attention back to productive work, according to Jennifer Abrams, author of *Having Hard Conversations* (Corwin, 2009).

A good facilitator, Abrams said, sets the tone and can “change the whole day” for a teaching team meeting. She recalls a moment from her time as a district staff developer for new teachers. It was 4 p.m., she said, and the teachers were tired after their workday. She began to hand out packets of information. She got to one young woman who seemed as though she was in a particularly bad mood. As she handed the woman the packet, the woman shoved it back and said, “I totally know all this already.”

Abrams said she took a deep breath to compose herself, recognized that the woman might have other concerns bothering her, and said, “I’m not disputing that you have background knowledge and expertise. I’m also committed to not wasting your time. I’m OK with you leaving, but



you’ll need to let your principal know if you’re doing that.”

Several critical elements averted making a difficult situation worse, according to Abrams: She paused and made sure to get oxygen to her brain; she used the power of positive presupposition to avoid making the confrontation personal and assumed that other challenges were behind the woman’s bad mood; she acknowledged the woman’s expertise; she promised the woman that her time would be valued; and she gave her the ability to choose, albeit with consequences.

### Challenge yourself.

Learning to facilitate involves challenging oneself, Abrams said.

*Continued on p. 4*



## Coaches lead professional learning on a road not always taken

Most people have been faced with a fork in the road, where they were not sure which path to take. In the poem “The Road Not Taken,” the American poet Robert Frost illustrates the difficult decision to follow one of two paths. While some interpret the poem as a call to take the road less traveled, one that veers from the norm, others have professed that it is more about considering the paths we don’t take.

Decisions about teaching and learning paths can present a similar dilemma among educators today, especially when it comes to ways to leverage professional learning to meet curriculum and performance goals for students and educators. Rather than a focus solely on student outcomes, those with responsibility to

lead, facilitate, plan, and implement professional learning also attend to educator performance standards that set reliable indicators of effectiveness.

The Outcomes standard describes three actions essential to determining professional learning content that should be considered prior to engaging in any instance of professional learning: Address student curriculum standards, meet performance standards, and build coherence.

**Engage others in professional learning to increase student results.** Use student curriculum and assessment standards to identify professional learning needs and inform decisions about the content of professional learning. These standards identify what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do in a specified discipline, and should reflect the content in classroom instruction and guide content for educator professional learning.

**Similarly, identify the expectations for your role, responsibilities, and performance standards, and do the same for those you support to better understand the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices required to be effective.** Use educator performance standards to identify professional learning needs, and make decisions about the content of professional learning activities. These standards address what educators are expected to know, understand, and be able to do in their specified role or position. The performance standards should

accurately reflect effective practice in the workplace and educator professional learning.

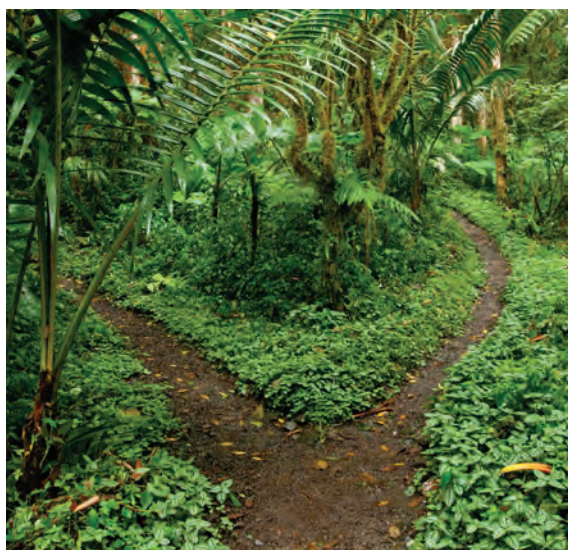
**Facilitate dialogue about the congruence between professional learning and other initiatives to support a seamless professional learning system.** Identify the relationship among schoolwide, team, and individual improvement goals to ensure alignment and sustainability. Develop a coherent set of learning opportunities that build on prior experiences and scaffold learning while providing for ongoing engagement with colleagues.

Coaches, teacher leaders, and instructional support staff who recognize the link between student learning and educator professional learning can be influential in moving beyond fragmented, topic-based professional learning. They lead others on a road not always taken by focusing on both student and educator learning. Their insight, guidance, and experience in supporting schools, teacher teams, and individuals is invaluable, and can increase the likelihood that professional learning contributes to student learning.

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## Meet needs of individual teachers with differentiated coaching

I've worked in three schools in the coach's role over the last eight years. I helped open my current school, where I work with about two dozen teachers.

It's important to get to know the teachers and how they approach their students. I start out working with people who are excited and interested in being coached, and then word of mouth helps spread the practice. People start saying, "Why is she working in your room? I want her in my room, too."

It's important to build trust. I had to build up trust by offering to teach a whole group lesson, to help the teachers. That helped them trust me — when they were able to watch me. I had to prove myself, prove that I knew what I was doing and was willing to find resources that would help them. It was good for me and for the teachers to begin with more whole-group professional development, too.

Grade-level teams have instructional practices they want to work on, so I plan lessons with them and then slide into coaching. The principal and I also looked at the data and identified a high-needs grade. Every day I modeled lessons or co-taught with a teacher who had the most students who were struggling, both helping the teacher with the skills she needed to boost student learning and also helping directly instruct the students.

In our district, the coaches are the vehicle between the district and the building, so we transfer information

from the district through coaching rather than through the stand-and-deliver model. Instead of giving teachers the district's list of reading strategies, we go in and model them. Three years ago, we adopted a new reading curriculum and as part of the launch, I modeled shared and guided reading lessons for all the teachers. I visited every classroom.

I try to work with every grade level during the year, co-planning with teachers and co-teaching for kids, modeling then checking in, talking and working when necessary with targeted students until teachers can apply strategies in their own settings.

I began working with the speech/language pathologist and the resource teacher. It's been huge learning for those teachers, but we're also seeing the impact with students. Kids are making the connections in the different classroom settings from the strategies the teachers are learning, and the classroom teachers are noticing that.

I've been able to take some risks so that the teachers can see that I'm also a learner. You have to be excited about learning yourself.

We started lesson studies late last year. Teachers were a little reluctant to sign up, but I did some recruiting and got a team going. The impact was huge. We planned the lesson together, observed students, and as soon as the teachers came back, they were in awe. They found something they could go back and use in their classroom that afternoon.

I think of coaching like a classroom. There are people you model for and work with a short time and that work has a huge impact. Then there are some that you just check in with on a regular basis to support them. There are some with whom



you need to do more intentional planning on how to support them. It's differentiated coaching.

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*Continued from p. 1*

“Someone once told me that if I wanted to stretch myself, I should try to facilitate groups,” she said. “And I agree that it can be scary, but as Paulo Coehlo said, ‘If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It is lethal.’”

“As a teacher leader, I needed to step into the discomfort. Teacher leaders need to be open to the mystery of what happens when we get a group together and instead of being intimidated by the group, get curious about what the possibilities are. The facilitator role can be exciting.”

Being prepared emotionally can be half the battle, Abrams said. She recommended preparing to facilitate by taking care of yourself first:

- Get a good night’s sleep.
- Work out in the morning.
- Dress comfortably, but professionally.
- Listen to empowering music just before the meeting.

**Prepare mentally so you can be mindful of your facial expression and your gestures to keep your body language positive. Watch your eye contact — avoiding eye contact with someone can signal hesitation, but a too-intense stare is confrontational.**

— Jennifer Abrams

She said she often wears a charm on a necklace that she can grab in a moment of stress.

While some of the fundamentals of facilitating are covered in books such as *Unlocking Group Potential*, by Robert Garmston with Valerie von Frank (Corwin, 2012), Abrams said the biggest hurdle for most new facilitators is handling challenging situations and knowing when to intervene.

The first thing to keep at the forefront, she said, is to work to maintain the conversation at the highest possible level by keeping the topic tied to a framework, a standard, a research-based teaching practice, a job description, a school goal or something that maintains neutrality.

But when that fails? What do new facilitators need to know to prepare for times when the conversation gets hard? Abrams suggests

that facilitators do the following:

#### **Be self-aware.**

Consider the language you choose to frame the issue or topic. Make sure it is professional, Abrams said. She said some language triggers immediate defensiveness, and the evidence shows up quickly in people’s faces — a grimace, a clenched jaw, a quickly shifted gaze.

For example, she said, others’ reaction is completely different to these two approaches:

- We need to look for ways to effectively manage technology in the classroom to enhance children’s learning.
- We’re not using our interactive whiteboards right.

One caveat, she added, is not to say anything at all unless you have clearly in mind what different behavior you would like to see instead.

“Do not pass ‘go’ unless you know what you would substitute,” she said. “It cannot be fuzzy in your mind. You have to know.”

Prepare mentally so you can be mindful of your facial expression and your gestures, she said, to keep your body language positive. Watch your eye contact — avoiding eye contact with someone can signal hesitation, but a too-intense stare is confrontational, she said.

She said the goal is to aim for a middle ground that is effective for the situation, trying to imagine how listeners might perceive your body language.

Tone of voice is another essential element of good facilitation, according to Abrams.

“Having a credible voice, in which one’s tone goes down at the end of the sentences, provides the person speaking with a sense of authority, and gives listeners the feeling that the speaker knows the subject,” she said. “When one is using an approachable voice, or ‘up speak,’ the listener is less likely to sense strength of conviction in the speaker and might be less likely to take the speaker seriously — but also will be less likely to perceive a threat.”

#### **Know when to speak.**

Silence can sometimes be OK, she said. Ask yourself a few questions before intervening with the group when you feel things aren’t on the right track. Sometimes the group may veer into excuses, for example, she said, or may want to talk about students instead of instruction. To decide whether to intervene, she said:

- Consider timing. Will your message be received? Is the group in the right frame of mind? Is there enough time for the conversation that might ensue? For people to process?
- Consider the stakes. How high are the stakes for intervening? How important is speaking up to making an improvement for students? What are the negative effects if you do speak out? Will you be able to change anything?
- Consider the next step. Is what you want to happen manageable, or might the group see it as overwhelming? What’s the worst that will happen if you don’t speak up? Is this your issue alone or a broader issue (i.e., is this only a difference of opinion)?

Make your statements short and clear, then allow time for your words to be processed, she said. Once you’ve spoken, she said, don’t continue talking just because you’re uncomfortable.

“Break the habit of seeing the truth as a problem,” she said.

#### **Know when to have a private conversation.**

Sometimes a matter might be best handled with an

*Continued on p. 5*

**SENTENCE STARTERS TO SHIFT THE TONE**

Jennifer Abrams, author of *Having Hard Conversations* (Corwin, 2009), said some sentence starters are better openers to change charged situations and affect the tone of a conversation. She suggests trying these:

- “Tell me more about what makes you say that.”
- “I’m not willing to agree with that generalization.”
- “Do you think that’s true generally? Do you have a specific student or example in mind?”



- “Some of the words you just used make me uncomfortable.”
- “I don’t agree with what you just said. Could you please share more about what you mean?”
- “That makes me feel uncomfortable. Can we talk about it?”
- “That seems unfair to me. Do you really feel that way?”



- “Could you explain that to me, please?”
- “Tell me more about what makes you say that.”
- “I have a different opinion, but I’m willing to listen and share.”
- “Here’s an example of how I feel differently.”

*Continued from p. 4*  
individual if it stems from that person’s situation alone and not the group’s, Abrams said. She said the facilitator may want to set up a time for a private conversation rather than take time with the group as a whole for a topic that affects only one person.

Before deciding to ask for a private conversation, she said, consider:

- Is this matter educationally or professionally unsound?
- Is the person’s action physically unsafe for students or other staff?
- Is this an action or behavior that might cause emotional damage to students or staff?

When setting up an individual conversation about an issue that arises in the meeting, such as a norm that is repeatedly violated, Abrams said it’s important to consider what messages are sent by the location. For example, the teacher might be more comfortable in her classroom, but a neutral space might put both parties on a better footing. Be aware, she said, of nonverbal signals, such as furniture between you, where your knees are pointed, and whether you might want to have a “third point” such as a piece of paper to reference to focus attention and reduce tension at critical moments.

“It’s good to be aware of how furniture and location have an impact on peoples’ level of comfort,” she said.

**Find your voice**

Abrams, who publishes an e-newsletter called *Voice Lessons*, says the most important aspect of growing into a

leadership role is finding your voice. She quotes Harriet Lerner, in *The Dance of Connection*:

“Our conversations invent us. Through our speech and our silence, we become smaller or larger selves. Through our speech and our silence, we diminish or enhance the other person, and we narrow or expand the possibilities between us. How we use our voice determines the quality of our relationships, who we are in the world, and what the world can be and might become. Clearly, a lot is at stake here.” (Lerner, 2001, p. 239.)

“For teacher leaders who want to facilitate,” Abrams said, “the stake in finding our voices is being able to bring about the kind of change we know can make a real difference in the classroom.”

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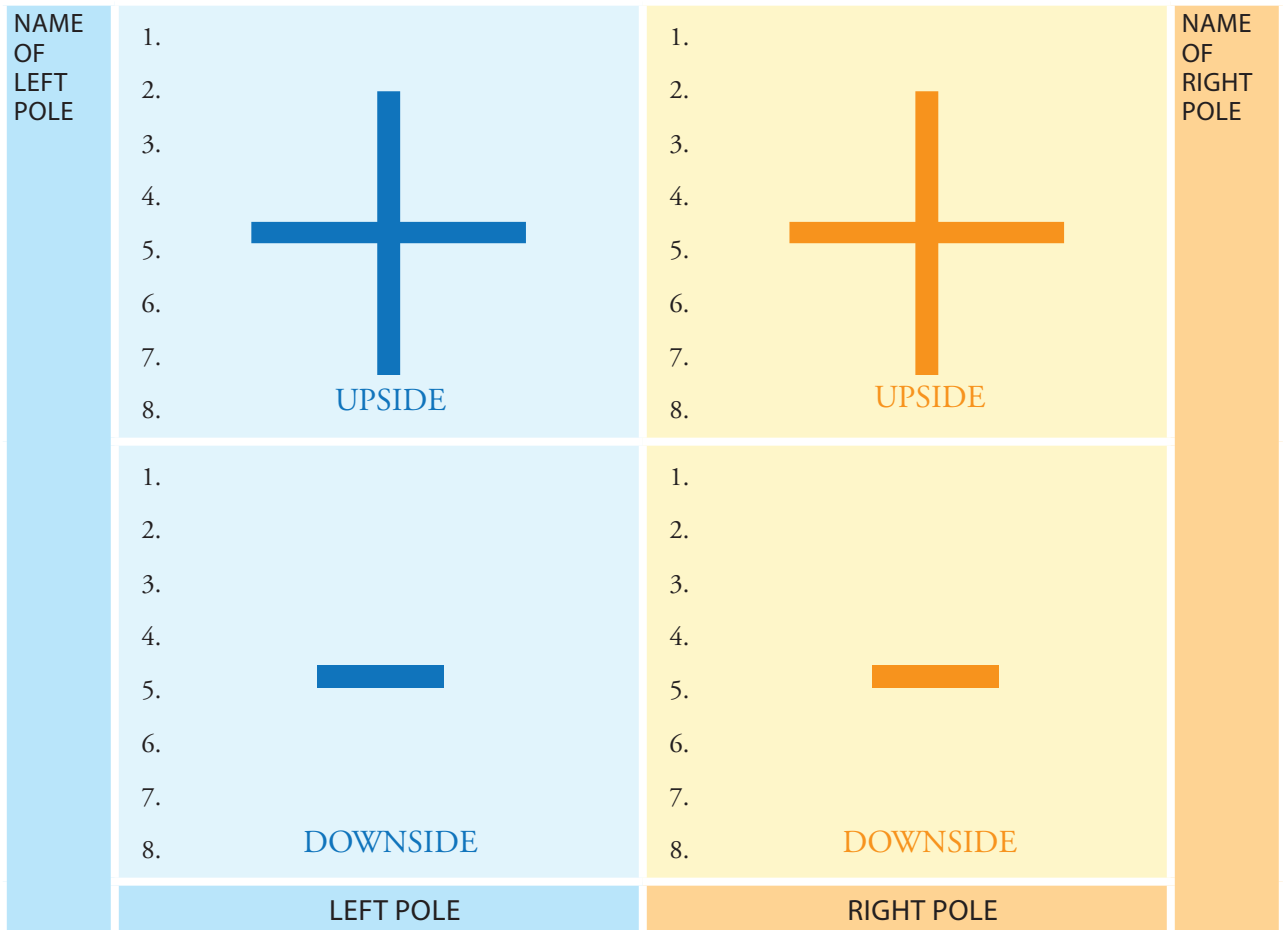
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**P O L A R I T Y   M A P**



# THE POLARITY MAP

**T**eacher-facilitators guiding groups through difficult discussions need a range of protocols to support making such conversations productive. The Polarity Map on these pages is a tool for mapping paradoxes or dilemmas. The map provides a structure for making invisible tensions visible and for addressing the whole polarity picture. Once the map is completed through collaborative conversation, it provides a focus for the group to engage in dialogue from diverse perspectives. This concept draws on that of Barry Johnson in *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (1996).

The structure is a square divided into four quadrants. The right and left halves are each called poles. The upper part of each pole contains the positive aspects of that pole,

referred to as its upside. The lower part of each pole contains the negative aspects of that pole and is called the downside. For maximum effectiveness in managing a polarity, groups create and discover the content of all four quadrants.

Once a group has completely mapped a polarity on chart paper, a facilitated conversation offers members the opportunity to view and explore the dilemma as a whole and from multiple perspectives. Further, the group can now generate strategies for staying in the upsides of both poles while avoiding the downsides of each pole. A facilitator's questions in this discussion are invitational in tone and form and can help promote group dialogue and discussion. These kinds of questions are intentionally designed to engage and transform group members' thinking and perspectives.

## GUIDELINES FOR CREATING A POLARITY MAP

1 Define the challenge. Identify an ongoing, chronic issue that

- Is within your sphere of influence.
- Has eluded problem solving.
- Must be addressed in the next two months.

2 Identify a key polarity. A polarity differs from a problem in that all four of the following must be present. Explore these questions to learn if you have a polarity.

- In what ways do you continue to experience this issue over time?
- In what ways are there two interdependent alternatives? This means that you can only focus on one pole for so long before you are required to focus on the other pole.
- What is the necessity of having the upsides of both poles over time?
- To what extent will focusing on one upside to the neglect of the other eventually undermine your productivity?

Use dialogue to create a description of the issues that doesn't lay blame, and describe opportunities and polarities present in any given situation.

3 Agree on the names for the poles. Names for poles are value-neutral. Avoid language with charged connotations.

4 Write the pole names on the map.  
The map is created on chart paper so that group members may see the map as it unfolds.

5 Brainstorm together the content for each quadrant.  
Aim for four to eight entries in each quadrant.  
Identify both upsides, asking, "What are some positives or upsides of \_\_\_\_ (this pole)?"  
"Then identify both downsides, asking, "What are the negatives of over-focusing on a pole to the neglect of the other pole?"  
This order can be modified to meet individual and group needs.  
The result of the brainstorming is that oppositional values and fears are identified and respected as important.

6 Agree on a higher purpose and a deeper fear.  
Agreeing on a higher purpose and a deeper fear integrates oppositional views and provides a reason to manage the tension between the two views.  
The higher purpose is the major benefit for managing the polarity well, and the deeper fear is the major negative for not managing the polarity well.

**Reference:** Johnson, B. (1996). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

**Source:** Adapted with permission from Garmston, R. with von Frank, V. (2012). *Unlocking group potential to improve schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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Tapping Technology to Enhance Professional Learning

**M**ore stakeholders are turning to technology to advance the professional learning required to support new standards and evaluation systems. Yet how technology is used will determine its potential to influence educator practice and results for students. This brief outlines how technology can enhance professional learning, offers examples of how technology is being used to meet the demand generated by Common Core standards, provides guidelines for selecting and using technology as a resource for professional learning, and identifies common challenges and ways to avoid them.



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