

# THE LEADING Teacher

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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.

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“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. versus
- 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

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**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.”

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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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