TOP SKILLS FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

SPARK EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE TO SOLVE COMPLEX ISSUES

By Steven A. Schiola

To ensure that all students learn at high levels, teachers must collaborate with colleagues to examine student achievement data, plan or adjust instruction, and track student progress (Schmoker, 2006). By meeting in professional learning communities (Dufour, 2004), teachers continually examine instructional strategies and improve student learning.

This school-based, classroom-focused, teacher-initiated reform requires school and district leaders who possess the skills to create conditions that allow teachers to collaborate effectively. Although teacher and administrator preparation programs might not equip educators to do this, school and district leaders can teach and model the skills necessary to facilitate productive conversations among teachers.

Facilitation skills that create the conditions for effective teacher dialogue include:

- Understand the problem clearly.
- Understand the purpose of each meeting.
- Establish working agreements.
- Use effective decision-making strategies.
- Ensure every voice is in the room (Schiola, 2011).

What follows is an explanation of these skills and a protocol lead teachers and educational leaders can implement to guide faculty through difficult conversations to solve complex problems.

UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM CLEARLY

The first facilitation skill is to clearly understand the problem. This sounds obvious, yet without a clear understanding of the real problem, a group can waste valuable time and effort heading down many wrong paths.

For instance, it is not enough to be aware that reading achievement for 5th-grade students must improve or, even more specifically, that the area of concern is comprehension. These topics are too broad to inspire effective intervention techniques.

School leaders and teachers must probe deeper, using formal and informal assessment data to determine that students are strong in literal comprehension but are lost when asked to make inferences about a poem they've just read. Understanding the real problem allows teachers to design creative interventions to teach students how to infer successfully.

UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF EACH MEETING

Facilitators also need a clear understanding of the purpose of each meeting and how that purpose fits in with the overall purpose of the school.

At the outset of a new project, groups vow to adhere to protocols, but distractions creep in. Being clear about the purpose of each meeting will focus participants' attention on the topic and provide a way to evaluate the meeting's success. Here are two examples of clear purpose statements for meetings:

- "At the meeting today, we will identify all of the students who already meet the objective, those who are in progress, and those students who do not meet the objective at all."
- "During this meeting, we will brainstorm strategies to help students understand the concept of photosynthesis completely and decide which three we will implement."

ESTABLISH WORKING AGREEMENTS

To work successfully with a group and avoid needless confrontation and misunderstanding, the facilitator needs to make the social rules explicit and understood by all.

There are three reasons for this. First, the facilitator's job is to ensure that group members have a safe working environment. In some cases, the group will be working on sensitive issues or will include people who are in outright conflict with one another. Making these rules explicit ensures that safety.

Second, by establishing overt social rules, the facilitator eliminates some of the classic avenues for people to derail the process, such as interrupting others, refusing to follow instructions, making snide comments, or having side conversations, to name a few. Third, people will operate using social rules, so the facilitator can establish or emphasize social rules that he or she believes will be most effective for the group.

The simplest process for developing working agreements is to provide the group with a list, such as:

- Honor our diversity.
- Work for the common good.
- Presume good intentions.
- Participate fully.

- Take care of your needs.
- Solve problems face to face.
- Respect one another.
- Have fun!

The facilitator makes certain that the group understands each item on the list, then asks for any additions. Once the group has agreed on the contents of the list, the working agreement is used during each meeting.

Note: Working agreements only work if they are used and enforced. The facilitator will know if they are embedded in the process if group members reinforce compliance.

USE EFFECTIVE DECISION-MAKING STRATEGIES

When groups work together, conflicts arise, especially if group members don't have a clear understanding of how they will make decisions.

Here's an example: Four 2nd-grade teachers are working to identify teaching strategies that will help students effectively read words with long vowels. At the end of a meeting, two of the teachers understand that they are to implement the strategies identified in the meeting immediately, while the other two teachers expect to continue the discussion at the next meeting. The first two teachers then introduce the strategies to their classes, and the other two do not. At the next meeting, an argument ensues.

The conflict could have been avoided if the teachers had adopted a decision-making strategy before starting their work. Two decision-making strategies used regularly are consensus and voting.

With voting, the group adopts the majority opinion. Of course, this means that, with each decision, there are winners and losers.

With consensus, the group works to develop a decision all members can live with and implement. This decision-making strategy may take longer than voting, but there is higher compliance with the decision.

Consensus decision-making is only successful if all involved adhere to these guidelines:

1. Everyone's voice is heard in the discussion about the decision.
2. Everyone can live with the decision.
3. Everyone can support the decision publicly.
4. Anyone who disagrees must suggest an alternative solution (Chadwick, 2000).

No matter which strategy is used, group members must identify it at the beginning of the process and use it to guide their work.

ENSURE EVERY VOICE IS IN THE ROOM

The key to solving complex problems in groups of any size is listening (Chadwick, 2000). For groups to work

CURRENT STATE/PREFERRED FUTURE PROTOCOL

	Current state (15 minutes)	Preferred future (15 minutes)	Next steps (15 to 30 minutes)
Once teachers are comfortable with the protocol, they can expect the entire process to take 45 to 60 minutes. Discussing the current state and preferred future will take about 15 minutes each. The remaining 15 to 30 minutes is used to develop effective strategies to address the identified problem(s). The more accurate the data used to identified the current state, the quicker teachers can get to the other two steps.	1. Each member of the group lists the current state of the situation or problem he or she is working on. Write in as much detail as possible about the status of student achievement in the focus area (i.e. how many students are proficient, developing, or unsatisfactory in the skill area, what strategies have been tried, the assessment results, etc.) 2. Each group member shares his or her list, and each response is recorded. 3. After all the items are discussed, group members make note of the themes they see in the results.	4. Next, the group considers the preferred future. Each member writes what he or she thinks would be the goal of the work (i.e. all students will score proficient on the assessment, 95% of students will complete the task with 80% accuracy or above, etc.). 5. Each group member shares his or her responses, and the group decides on a goal.	6. Group members list instructional strategies that will help students achieve the stated goal. 7. Group members share and record strategies, then the whole group decides which strategies to implement. 8. Teachers in the group implement the agreed-upon strategies, administer assessment, and come back together to examine the results.

effectively, each person needs a chance to express his or her opinion while the others listen. It is only through the combined wisdom of the entire group that reasonable and doable solutions are developed.

The way to ensure that every voice is heard is by slowing down the process and working in small groups. Effective groups slow the process down by hearing from each member of the group individually. This ensures that each person has an opportunity to speak without competition or interruption. A large group can be subdivided into smaller groups of four to five people.

Once group members get into the habit of hearing from each person in turn, the process can move quickly. While a free-flowing discussion of ideas can be useful and stimulating, many times the discussion is dominated by a small handful of participants, forcing the rest of the group to either fight to speak or choose not to speak at all.

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Once a group has implemented and practiced these facilitation skills, group members can put them all together to do the work of improving student achievement. Groups can focus and stay on topic if they follow a defined protocol.

One protocol that is easy to implement is called the current state/preferred future protocol (Bailey, 1997). The protocol, outlined above, is broken down into three stages: current state, preferred future, and next steps.

The protocol is a continuing cycle of discussion, implemen-

tation, data collection, and examination. As group members become familiar with the protocol and the facilitation skills, the cycle moves quickly.

When school leaders and teachers learn, model, and use these facilitation skills and protocol, small groups of highly effective teachers working collaboratively can ensure high levels of learning for all students.

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