BALANCED CONVERSATIONS PROMOTE SHARED OWNERSHIP

School culture involves individuals' collective beliefs, values, and propensities to act in certain ways. These beliefs, values, and propensities are both manifested in and shaped by the group's conversations. A reasonable goal for grade-level or department teams and others working to improve school culture, then, is to become competent in conversing about their work.

One skill groups need to develop is the ability to have balanced conversations. Balanced conversations are essential for educators to exchange ideas and make informed decisions. Balanced does not mean that members speak for similar amounts of time, but rather that each member engages in relevant conversation about the meeting's topics. Having each group member actively involved in the conversation is essential for all to feel ownership of group decisions, a defining quality of successful groups.

In talking about group work, I deliberately use the term *ownership* rather than *buy-in*, which subliminally connotes more questionable goals and presuppositions. The term *buy-in* assumes the goal is selling, presupposes a salesperson, and suggests *sales resistance* as an expected part of the interaction. Balanced conversations promote shared ownership, which begets understanding, commitment, and follow-through.

Over time, groups can develop the expertise that allows them to positively shape school culture. Not all groups become expert in managing meetings, just as not all teachers become experts (Berliner, 1994). Berliner found that developing expertise requires study and practice over hundreds of hours and multiple years. To help groups achieve competence, professional development leaders provide training, gradually add meeting tools, and enable structured reflections.

ROADBLOCKS TO BALANCED CONVERSATIONS

Group leaders, facilitators, or professional developers must help group members resolve three types of challenges to get to balanced conversations: airtime imbalance among members, talkative leaders, and limited protocols for con-
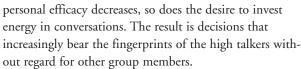
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ducting meetings.

Airtime imbalance. Members sometimes complain that their team spends a lot of time discussing and reaching agreements about topics, but some members stay quiet and then walk away and do what they want. When the quiet ones are asked about not keeping the group's agreements, the outliers always seem to have good reasons for why they have deviated from the decisions. When it happens repeatedly, teams wonder why they should take time to discuss issues if some members are going to violate the group's decisions.

I've also encountered settings where one or two members monopolize airtime. Often, they are the first to speak, setting the context for the whole conversation. They may be people who think best by externalizing their thoughts; they may have limited capacity to restrain impulsivity; they also may simply be intensely involved in the topic. Usually, however, these people are not conscious of the effects they have on a group. When this dynamic occurs repeatedly, the group adapts by decreasing participation, and members may have a limited sense of their ability to influence the group. As personal efficacy decreases, so does the desire to invest energy in conversations. The result is decisions that increasingly bear the fingerprints of the high talkers without regard for other group members.

Talkative leaders. I worked with a group in which the group leader posed a question and, before anyone responded, launched into her own detailed answer. Since this happened repeatedly, group members learned to be quiet until the leader had finished. Then, only with prompting, did members add their own ideas. In another setting, a principal confided she was trying to get the faculty to be more interactive. She started the group brainstorming on a topic, but then dominated the recording of ideas. She was unaware that her behaviors worked against her goal of participatory decision making.

Too few protocols. Sound consideration of important issues requires diversity of voice and opinion. In some settings, groups are conscious of wanting to hear from all members, yet lack tools to achieve this goal. They may not have a repertoire of strategies to keep members focused or to create situations in which all members can be heard. Sometimes, what is missing is how to reach decisions after dialogue or strategies to handle violations of group norms.

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.

REMOVING ROADBLOCKS

The most effective groups combine two resolutions to these issues. The first is to help group leaders develop a growing tool kit of protocols to manage challenging group dynamics. A second is to have group leaders use structured reflection to increase group and individual consciousness of behaviors.

Provide tools. In technology, the word "protocols" refers to rules that allow two or more pieces of equipment to "talk to each other"; in diplomacy, protocols govern diplomatic etiquette; in medicine and science, they are rules for faithful reproduction of processes.

In instruction, protocols establish environments for learning by providing prescriptions for conversations. They designate a topic, separate listening from speaking, require specified thinking processes, stipulate time limits, and set topic boundaries. Protocols are especially necessary for hard-to-talk-about topics because they provide structures for psychological safety. Using a variety of protocols increases the effectiveness and efficiency of group meeting. Protocols are often referred to as processes, strategies, or group tools. *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (Christopher-Gordon, 1999) outlines 50 meeting protocols, including those listed here.

Brainstorming is an example of a protocol to generate ideas. The protocol "paraphrase passport," in which each new speaker must paraphrase the preceding speaker as a passport to speaking himself, is designed to assist listening. Ritualized pauses (before speaking, members silently count down "three-two-one" after a person has talked) aid reflection in dialogue.

Text-based protocols provide rich interaction for all members. Let's say a group is developing a new homework policy. In "say something," pairs read a short piece of relevant text, pausing at the end of passages to say something to each other about the content. They might talk about agreements with the text, connect the reading to their own homework practices, or raise questions or challenges. Now a full-group conversation can take place knowing that each member has been mentally engaged and put ideas in play. Text-based protocols — or any subgroup conversation protocols — also make it easier for members to present to the full group and maintain anonymity since individuals can report, "Our group thought … ."

Structured reflection. Adults do not learn from experience but rather from reflecting on experience. Reflection helps address group dynamics and individual behaviors. Meetings improve when groups reflect about their work. Conversations become more balanced and productive. The group increases control over members' own practices, which leads to increased satisfaction and willingness to participate.

Group leaders can provide work groups with several ways of bringing consciousness and self-monitoring to their work. The simple question, "What seems to be going on here?" asked of a group that in the moment is functioning ineffectively stimulates observations that lead to corrections. Self-monitoring questions illuminate perceptions, decisions, and decision products, which inevitably leads members to better practices.

The following protocol gets astounding results: After a segment of conversation, ask each member to silently reflect on the questions, "What decisions did you make about when and how to participate? What were the effects of those decisions on you and on others?" Allow think time and have members either write responses, share with a neighbor or with the whole group. When this happens several times, group members sharpen their metacognitive skills and increase personal and team effectiveness.

See the box below for a way to evoke reflection about balanced conversations. The inventory is from *The Adaptive School: Developing and Facilitating Collaborative Groups Syllabus* (Garmston & Wellman, 2002.)

Too often, without professional learning opportunities, groups are doomed to chaotic and frustrating meetings. These meetings are unlikely to produce change or any other positive result. Creating a collaborative culture is a complex goal worthy of the investment in time and energy. The informed participation of many voices in balanced conversation is one skill that enables groups to progress toward that complex goal.

Seeking a balance

Give each member this inventory. Tally the results and have the group discuss the cumulative answers as well as where members found the greatest similarities and differences between their own answers and the group's responses as a whole.

AT THIS MEETING:
- We balanced participation   1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5
- The degree to which I felt listened to   1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5
- The degree to which I listened to others   1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

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Berliner, D. (1994). Expertise: The wonder of exemplary performances. In C.C. Block, J. Mangieri, & H. Barnes (Eds.), *Creating powerful thinking in teachers and students*. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College.

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