

# THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDE FOR DISTRICT TEAMS



**T**hank you for being a district member with Learning Forward. To help you spread the learning and engagement with your colleagues, we have designed this supplemental guide exclusively for district members.

This guide will help you take your teams through a deep dive into the February issue of [The Learning Professional](#), which focuses on building community in a divided world. Community and collaboration are fundamental aspects of high-quality professional learning, but our ability to nurture them is being tested in today's tense times. The issue's authors help us resist the temptation to get mired in the division by establishing norms, listening actively, empowering inquiry, and engaging in other productive strategies.

By reading the issue and using this guide, teams will:

- Consider how to set group norms to create equitable and

inclusive communities;

- Improve question-asking strategies to foster deep listening and empathy; and
- Learn to tackle complex challenges with a nuanced, reflective, and collaborative approach.

You may wish to send this guide, or portions of it, to your team members to help everyone engage in the activities. Alternatively, you may wish to use it as a facilitation guide and walk your team through the activities yourself. We invite you to share the learning opportunities however they work best for you.

Be sure to give us feedback about whether you found this useful, and, if you post on social media, tag us [#TheLearningPro](#) [@LearningForward](#) so we can share your good work.

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**NEED HELP LOGGING IN?** If you or your colleagues have questions about logging in with your district membership to access the articles, call **800-727-7288** or email [christy.colclasure@learningforward.org](mailto:christy.colclasure@learningforward.org).

# GET STARTED

## Rethink your group norms

**E**stablishing norms for communication is an important part of building a learning community because norms can help build consistency and trust and lead to respectful and productive collaboration. Facilitators commonly ask groups to establish their own norms to foster ownership. But in their article [“Should groups set their own norms? Maybe not,”](#) Joyce Lin and Ayanna Perry (p. 30) argue that this practice is problematic, especially with newly formed groups. They write that it “typically generates norms consistent with dominant perspectives and cultures,” and members from marginalized communities may not feel comfortable disagreeing with those dominant perspectives.

### ACTIONS:

1. Ask participants to read the article, paying particular attention to the sections on “why collaborative norms can be problematic” (p. 31) and the three norms the authors developed, which are listed in the middle column of p. 32.
2. Ask participants to write a brief reflection based on the sentence, “I used to think \_\_\_\_\_, and now I wonder \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. Facilitate a discussion about the reflections and participants’ reactions to the issues raised in the article. Questions might include the following:
  - What is your process for setting norms?
  - What do you think about that process after reading the article and reflecting?
  - What assumptions are embedded in your approach to norm-setting? What would be the counternarrative to those assumptions?
  - Are you interested in trying the authors’ approach of preset norms? Why or why not?
4. Post and review the following three norms developed by the authors:
  - Impact is greater than intent, so own your impact and examine, investigate, and interrogate your intent.
  - Ask for what you need and tell what you can give.
  - Ask for what others need and what others can give.
5. Facilitate a discussion about these norms, including these questions:
  - What do you find valuable or useful about these norms?
  - What concerns do you have about them?
  - How might you modify them to fit your needs?
6. Discuss how you will put today’s reflections into action.
  - Will you try a new approach to norm-setting? Why or why not?
  - If so, what do you hope to accomplish? How will you know if you have accomplished it?
  - What other practices do you use with the groups you facilitate that might have unexamined assumptions? How might you reflect on them and experiment with different approaches?



# NEXT STEPS

## Ask better questions

**A**sking good questions is essential for listening and learning, which are in turn essential for creating a unified and productive community. But asking questions that lead to deep understanding isn't as easy it sounds. Fortunately, "Asking purposeful, productive questions can become a habit," writes former superintendent Charles Mason in the article ["Asking good questions is a leader's superpower"](#) (p. 38). He adds that, "Like building any habit, it takes consistent effort over time. It's up to you how to start, but for most of us, success is incremental rather than sudden."

### ACTIONS:

1. Ask everyone to read the article, paying particular attention to the six recommendations about improving question-asking habits.



2. Ask each team member to assess where they are on each of the six recommendations.

**1**  
I need to do a lot more work in this area.

**2**  
I'm doing OK in this area but could use some more practice.

**3**  
I feel confident about my skills in this area.

<b>a</b>	Recognize that asking questions of others builds your own knowledge.
<b>b</b>	Create an open, safe space for people to respond honestly and insightfully to your questions.
<b>c</b>	Involve others in the process of formulating and asking questions.
<b>d</b>	Communicate that you value your team members as individuals by asking them questions and carefully listening.
<b>e</b>	Ask questions at the front end of a process so you have the answers when you need them.
<b>f</b>	Use questions to enable others to develop themselves as leaders.

3. Ask each person to choose a recommendation on which they rated themselves a 1 or 2. Give everyone time to reread the corresponding section of the article and consider why that skill is important for building a strong community.
4. Through one-on-one or group discussion, help participants identify two actions they can take to practice that skill. The actions can come from the article or elsewhere. Create a plan for practicing those actions. If possible, begin practicing one of the actions with the group. For example, for the fourth recommendation in row d, the person could role-play a conversation in which they ask another participant questions about ideas for addressing a problem of practice.

## Overcome barriers to collaboration

In their article [“How to achieve collective efficacy in a time of division,”](#) Steven Katz and Jenni Donohoo write about some of the barriers to effective collaboration, especially during stressful and divisive times. One of those barriers is the “binary bias” — the human tendency to simplify complex issues into right/wrong or either/or thinking. Katz and Donohoo caution against that bias and draw on the work of psychologist Adam Grant to encourage us to expand our thinking and honor complexity. They share a collaboration protocol designed to help groups discuss and think collaboratively about complex challenges.



### ACTIONS:

1. Katz and Donohoo ground their article in psychologist Adam Grant’s book *Think Again*. Show participants [this video](#) of Grant talking about the roles of preacher, prosecutor, politician, and scientist.



2. Facilitate a conversation about the ideas in the video, using questions such as the following:
  - Can you think of times you acted as preacher, prosecutor, or politician because you thought it would lead to the best outcome for students? Looking back, what were the pros and cons of taking that approach?
  - Can you think of times you took a scientist approach instead? What happened as a result?
  - Do you agree with Grant that, if we had more people who think like scientists, we might have more progress in a divided world (and, specifically, in schools)? Why or why not?
  - What is likely to be easy and difficult about thinking more like scientists when approaching your school’s current challenges?
3. Give participants time to read or reread the Katz and Donohoo article. Encourage them to focus on how the protocol described can help them think more like scientists.
4. Replicate the reflection activity and discussion Katz and Donohoo describe on pp. 22-23, beginning with identifying an adaptive challenge and then using the consultancy protocol.
5. Facilitate a discussion about the use of the protocol, including questions such as the ones posed by Katz and Donohoo:
  - How did the protocol work for you? What did you learn from it?
  - How could you apply the protocol in your work? Why might you use it (or not use it)?
  - What are the challenges to using this approach? How could you address or overcome them?
6. Conclude by asking participants to reflect on their thinking patterns, especially about controversial issues or entrenched challenges. Ask them to journal about what they’ve learned from the video, article, and discussion and how it might shape their thinking going forward. You may wish to end with a quote from Adam Grant in the video at the beginning of this activity: “I think we need a rebranding of ‘I don’t know,’ ‘I was wrong,’ and ‘I’ve changed my mind.’ I think we need to recognize that those statements ... are a sign of being confident in your humility.”