SUSAN K. SPARKS

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Creating Intentional Collaboration

Susan K. Sparks

What is worth fighting for is not to allow our schools to be negative by default, but to make them positive by design.

—Michael Fullan and Clif Germain

Have you had a negative experience being on a team? Recall the team, how you felt, and what behaviors you noticed from yourself and all those around you. How many of the following behaviors look familiar?

- Attending without bringing necessary items to the meeting
- "Checking out" or focusing on unrelated tasks
- Discussing the same issue or student over and over
- Listening to one or two people doing most of the talking
- Complaining about the administration or district mandates
- Lamenting the lack of clear directions about the work
- Dismissing or demeaning others' points of view
- Withholding opinions during the meeting and talking afterward in the hallway, lounge, or parking lot
- Leaving the meeting without closure and a plan

If you found yourself relating to this list, you may have also noticed that poorly designed and unproductive team meetings create ripples through a school and create negative and unintended consequences. Conversations focus less on student learning and more on adult behaviors. Relationships become tentative and fragile. Few changes occur, and the end result of poor meetings is lack of trust, overt resistance, and disenfranchised teachers who see no value in the collaborative team process.

This scenario does not have to be your reality if you are thoughtful and intentional about the process of working together. Think about a team you have been part of that is truly collaborative and focused on student learning. You may have seen the following behaviors:

- Clarifying both purpose and goal at the start of the meeting
- Filling important roles such as facilitating and recording
- Using an agenda to stay focused on the meeting's purpose
- Attending to the task at hand and fully participating
- Using processes to discuss topics, gather information, analyze, and make decisions
- Listening and learning from diverse points of view
- Praising and congratulating one another
- Doing the work in the room, during the meeting
- Tackling tough issues
- Calling one another's attention to the norms
- Leaving knowing what is expected to prepare for the next meeting

Relationships on these teams are professional, and everyone is focused on student learning. There is a feeling of personal responsibility and a "can do" attitude from members. Positive energy creates ripples throughout the school, and it moves staff, students, and community to greater achievement and results. Teachers value their time together, and positive momentum occurs before, during, and after collaborative time.

You have the choice to become either one of these teams. Professional learning communities are built on the foundation of collaborative teams as interdependent, self-directed work groups focused on a common goal. Bossidy and Charan (2002) describe this balance between task and relationship in teams as the "hardware and software" of teams. They suggest that "the hardware of a computer is useless without the right software. Similarly, in an organization the hardware (strategy and structure) is inert without the software (beliefs and behaviors)" (p. 85). For some, the hardware is the "what" or the task. It is also the goal, the membership, the structures, and the time. The software may be the interpersonal effectiveness and trustworthiness of team members—the relationships. This chapter will highlight both hardware and software necessary for effective team meetings to show what works to build a high-performing team. You will learn how your contributions can play a pivotal role in your team's success. You can inspire others through leading by example.

Five Keys to Successful Team Meetings

To be successful, teachers should examine their team practice around five key elements of effective team meetings:

1. Focus
2. Roles and responsibilities
3. Structure
4. Process
5. Behaviors and relationships

The Team Meeting Organizer (page 35) provides a working tool to help you plan and address each of these components. Each element of the Organizer is described in detail in this chapter. Use it! Keep it front and center and refer to it throughout your meeting. Think of the Organizer as a lesson plan focused on results for your team. It takes a little time initially to work through, but teams that use it believe in its value. We know it is worth spending time planning to create a successful team experience; commit to using the tools and strategies described under each component in your meetings, and observe what works. There is not a perfect formula for what to do during your first team meeting, your second meeting, and so on. Just begin. Work together and talk out loud as you go. As you meet and work, you will learn more. You will continue to ask, "What do we need to do next?" Talking through the Team Meeting Organizer will help you design your next work session and stay focused on the work.

1. Focus

The professional learning community model has helped shift the focus of teams from casual conversations about individual students and climate issues to rich dialogue about student learning. Teams work together to create essential learnings, guaranteed and viable curriculum, formative and summative common assessments, and interventions, all for the purpose of improving student learning.

Because the focus of meetings is more intentional in a PLC, collaborative team meetings become a place where teachers successfully tackle the complex work of educating all students to high levels of learning. Under the heading of "Focus" on the Team Meeting Organizer are listed the following topics: SMART Goals, Purpose and Non-Purpose, Results, Objectives and Products, Linking, and Clarifying and Checking Perceptions.

SMART Goals

Your team must have a SMART goal. The goal is substantiated by data reflecting your current reality and a specific target area where your students need to improve. This goal becomes the end statement and what you aspire to. It is the reason your team exists. Your team goal must be explicit and agreed upon, and it must relate to improved student learning by directly contributing to the school goal or school

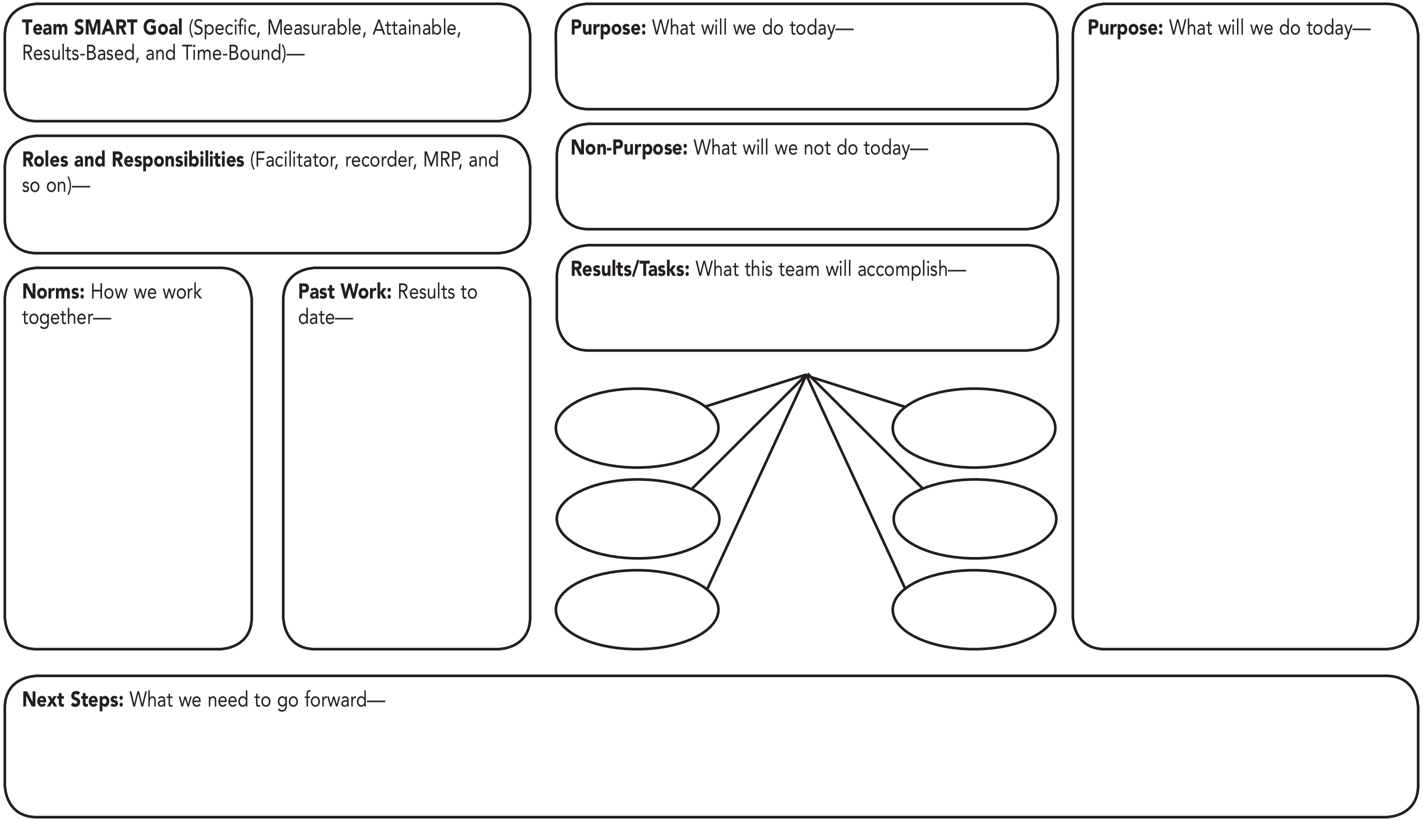

Figure 2-1. Team Meeting Organizer *(Adapted from Centennial BOCES, 2002.)*

improvement goal. After analysis and hard conversation, your team works in collaboration with your principal to reach consensus and begins. Your team takes action now!

School Goal Example

87% of students in grades 3–5 will score at either a proficient or advanced level of performance in writing as measured by the 2008 CSAP.

100% of students in grades K–5 will score proficient as measured by the district writing assessment by May 2008.

Team Goal Example

The power of the team goal is to remind us of our progress toward the school goal and provide opportunity to reflect and adjust instruction or content. The team goal supports the school goal and is based on specific and unique needs of the students.

By the end of January 2008, 90% of 4th-grade students will score at or above proficient in writing organization and conventions as measured by district level assessments.

Purpose

The school and team goal is the focus. However, it will not describe what you do each time you meet. The purpose is a statement of what you will accomplish during each team meeting. Examples of purpose statements include:

- "Today we will review our essential skills in writing and determine if they are still relevant and essential."
- "Today we are going to write student-friendly learning targets in seventh-grade mathematics."
- "Our purpose is to determine interventions for students not reading at grade level."

Every time you meet, a purpose statement needs to be expressed and written on the Team Organizer. If it is not evident what the purpose is, say out loud to your colleagues, "What are we focused on today? What do we want to accomplish?" or "Okay . . . where are we headed today?"

Non-Purpose

If you think team members are expecting something different from the meeting or have a hidden agenda, it may be beneficial to state the non-purpose of the meeting. Using non-purpose is a preventative strategy for being drawn off task. Statements should be framed in the positive. However, you may find yourself expressing non-negotiables or at least declarative statements in a way that describes "what we will not do." Examples of statements of non-purpose might be as follows:

- "Our non-purpose today is to backtrack and talk about why we are implementing professional learning communities."
- "Our non-purpose is to discuss individual student issues today."
- "Our non-purpose is to map out the upcoming unit. Remember, we have time for that on Thursday."

When you deliver a non-purpose, use a gentle and firm voice. This will allow the group to release some of their anxiety and focus on the task at hand.

Evaluation and Results

Along with determining how to track the goal and collect the data to support achievement of the goal, your team needs to think about evaluation and results. What tangible results will you have from your work together? Sometimes your work is defined in the parameters and non-negotiables from the school leadership team or principal. If not, make sure to describe, with specifics, what your outcome will look like. Ask, "What happened as a result of our work? Did students achieve and perform? What evidence do we have?" The best results are increased student performance and learning. However, teams also need to see short-term results and concrete products as they work toward improving student learning.

Objectives and Products

In your Organizer, write the specific objectives of the meeting. Capture the team's ideas in the planning bubbles. It may be one big idea with several details, or it may be specific products captured in the bubbles. Tom Many, Superintendent of Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96, encourages his teams to make their work real by writing a clear description or producing something tangible. Teams live by the mantra, "If it isn't written down, it doesn't exist." Many argues that if an idea can't be communicated in writing or with some kind of diagram or visual, there is still more clarification and work to be done to create mutual understanding. Team members benefit from shared meaning and creating tangible products together. It is important that teams have a clear picture of what they are working towards for each session. Examples of products include development of a writing rubric, a common assessment for an end of a unit, a definition of what constitutes a good intervention, a curriculum map for Algebra 1, and parental pamphlet describing departmental grading policies. This step will help you clarify what you specifically want to achieve during your time together.

Linking

Teachers are busy and move from one task to another, often multitasking in the same meeting! Sometimes it is difficult to remember what happened from one meeting to the next. It is good to remind yourselves of accomplishments and progress so far. Your team should link the purpose of each meeting to your past work; describe how much progress was made or what results occurred. The Team Organizer has a bubble for describing past work.

To link to the past, you might say:

- "Remember what we did last time we met? We reviewed research describing the value of professional learning communities and discussed the six essential elements."
- "The question we addressed last time we met was, 'Do professional learning communities make a difference in student achievement?'"
- "Last time we were together, we saw wonderful summary statements in our student writing."

To link to the future, make notes in the bubble for Next Meeting Focus. You may use statements like, "Remember, in a month, we need to turn in essential learning targets for our course," or, "Next week we will be reviewing our student achievement data and looking at the state and district results."

This technique is called linking past, present, and future, and it grounds your entire team. It helps you celebrate good work and creates awareness of your past productivity and the expectation that your productivity will continue and you will achieve results. Linking contributes to purposeful and intentional work.

Clarifying and Checking Perceptions

When you first begin, and throughout at periodic intervals, it is important to ask boundary questions such as, "Are we working within our parameters? What is our authority? What is our charge?" If you are not clear, ask your administrator. Do not hesitate to express that you want to do your best work and need a little more information and clarification. Effective teams check in the beginning, and they check as they go. Clarifying increases communication and ownership. It is good practice to share your understanding "out loud" and request guidance and advice.

Teams may stop work (or not even begin) if they are confused about the task and products. Sometimes, however, this confusion is actually a politically correct form of resistance. Don't let "confusion" derail your committee. If the roles and tasks are unclear, go ask your principal!

If your principal gives you his or her best answer and it is still muddy, jump in and begin anyway. Sometimes, work is not clear and a little—or a lot—messy. Start working. After you have accomplished something and started the process, go back to your principal and ask if this seems to be on track and what advice might he or she give you as you move forward.

Do not be the team that hesitates or actually resists doing something because of confusion. Try to complete some or all of the Focus bubbles on your Team Organizer, but do not get stuck overanalyzing and planning without action. Mike Schmoker (2006) warns us that spending too much time in planning will undo our best efforts. Upon his review of school improvement plans, he maintains that on close examination, lengthy, ambiguously worded documents wreak havoc (Schmoker, 2006). Be clear and purposeful. Take time up front, but do not get bogged down.

You should create your agenda only after identifying the SMART goal, purpose, non-purpose, linking, and results. This leads us to important questions. Who takes initiative for determining goals and purpose? Who creates the agenda? How does this happen?

2. Roles and Responsibilities

Formally naming team leaders, chairs, or facilitators helps the team move quickly. If your principal has not done this, ask, "What process would you recommend to define leadership roles in our team?" If the principal asks the team to decide, *decide.* Do not let this question go unasked and the task therefore undone.

Lack of planning, fuzzy goals, and unclear process can slow your team down for months and set you on a path of confusion and disillusionment. If your team needs to decide how you will work, suggest at your first meeting, "This is what I know about why we are meeting. We are being asked to create a collaborative team to impact student learning, so we need to be clear on our goal. I also think it will take work to organize. Is anyone willing to help us begin, define our task, and facilitate our first few meetings?"

If one of your teammates steps up, express you have an interest, too, and suggest you tag team. If no one volunteers, you might say, "I have an interest, and if you will help me think through the focus of our work, I will facilitate for a while." Here is your chance to learn more about leadership and facilitation and make a positive difference!

The typical roles within a collaborative team include facilitator, recorder, group member, and most responsible person (MRP). There are many more roles in teams too numerous to mention here. Consider the following, and commit to learning more.

Facilitator

The facilitator will help the team move forward and create results. This role can be shared, but whoever wears the facilitator hat must manage the process and ensure there is a beginning, middle, and end to each work session.

All members of the team should have opportunities for balanced input. Pay attention to managing one topic and one process at a time (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). The facilitator guides the team's work and makes things easy for the team. Facilitators often design the meeting and bring data for team discussion. Some schools and districts are providing accessible data and even arranging it for their teams, in which case the facilitator helps the data become public and used during team meetings.

Recorder

The recorder does the charting and note-taking for the team. Your team will need to decide how much to record, but the rule of thumb is to describe the purpose, what was accomplished, what was decided, next steps, and who will do it. It is also important to note what the team wants to do at the next meeting.

Some teams do not take minutes, but the facilitator will still need to track the work. This record becomes critical to linking to the next meeting and keeping the group on track. Legacy High School in Adams Twelve Five-Star School District in Broomfield, Colorado, uses an electronic reporting tool to report results and keep minutes. This tool provides focus and public record of each team's work.

Group Member

Effective group members stay conscious of their actions and behaviors in the meeting. They participate and use effective communication skills. A member of the group can become an MRP (Most Responsible Person) when a task needs to be completed or a resource gathered inside or outside the meeting. Every team member should be an MRP at one time or another. When everyone contributes, the work is balanced, and positive energy and goodwill spread.

The most effective teams are clear about the why, what, where, how, and when of their work. They are also clear about *who* is doing what. Defined roles and responsibilities may seem formal, and I have heard individuals say, "We do not like to get caught up with planning and process. We just want to work." As team leader, acknowledge this perspective, and explain that you have been using some of these tools and that you want to incorporate a few components in your meetings. Do not overwhelm team members with details; stay focused on student learning and the functions of collaborative teams. Use simple concepts and language that will fit your team. When the team sees results, members will appreciate its structure: "Our team is focused and organized. We share roles and responsibilities, and we get our work done."

3. Structure

The structure includes all the components one considers to create an effective team. It could be compared to building a home: If you do not have a blueprint, you will not have a plan to ensure that each room works with the structure as a whole. If you forget to build the foundation, the house will topple over. All the structural components must work together and be considered when you build an effective team.

Charts and Visuals

Visuals increase learning, group dynamics, attention, and ownership in your team. In *The Science of Non-Verbal Communication,* Michael Grinder (1997) teaches us that the visual communication tool allows the reader to process at his or her own rate and to look at the words as often has he or she needs to. The visual respects different types of learners. An oral presentation or statement can get lost, and participants may lose focus. The visual becomes the record; it makes the work of the team public. Recording and posting their words can also help individuals avoid "looping"—repeating the same idea or statements over and over.

Effective visuals help your team own the work and refocus when the conversation begins to stray. Participants see their words captured and know they are contributing. They also know they are being listened to and understood. Charts are powerful organizers and used well, become a structural tool for your team.

Every team needs an easel and chart in its meeting space to allow you to jump up at any time and capture the thinking and the agreements. Follow these simple rules for recording: Use white space, large printing, use earth-colored (blue, green, black, and brown) water-soluble markers, change colors for each idea or line, and record exactly what you hear. Deliberate use of color assists the participant in following the conversation; earth colors are easy on the eye and easy to read. Use red only to highlight or underline a point (Brandt, 1989). Clarify and honor the participation. If you are charting, make sure everyone's ideas are recorded.

Placement

Another strategy for creating positive structure is to move certain kinds of information off to the side (Grinder, 1997). If you are finished with one part of the meeting, for example, move the charts so they will not interfere with the next topic.

The "third point" technique is also helpful: If someone raises a sensitive issue, write it on the chart or a sheet of paper, and hold it off to the side. This separates difficult information from the sender and the receiver: It is much easier and less threatening to look for solutions and possibilities when the problem is depersonalized, when we are looking at a "third point" on paper rather than at a person in the room—especially when we are directly involved.

This technique is especially helpful when discussing assessment results. Post the results of student performance anonymously in a graph form, and ask the team to engage in a simple protocol. Tom Many asks teachers to use the "Here's What, So What? Now What?" method (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) for discussing the results of a common assessment. Once the overall results are posted, the team looks at the data in aggregate on the poster while privately comparing their own data to the group results.

Agenda

Most effective teams use a written agenda to keep the group focused and on track. The agenda is the road map to accomplish goals and purpose. Create the agenda after you know what you want to accomplish.

An agenda describes content and process. Start with the end in mind, and map backwards. What activities will get the team to the desired result and your session objectives? Your team might write down a title or a critical question for each agenda item, or your team may like longer agendas with more detail including time frames, decision points, and designation of who is responsible (MRP).

I like to post the purpose, agenda, and norms at each meeting on chart paper to introduce the work and check for agreement on the task at hand. Each team is different, and your process can vary within a team, too: You may not create charts each time you meet. The Team Organizer may be sufficient. The key is to find some way to show the team that you have a plan and direction. As the meeting progresses, you can even check off components. It is a subtle but helpful move to show progress.

Defining Norms

Norms are behavioral guidelines and agreements about how we will work together. Your team should have explicit norms that are created by and agreed upon by all the members of your team. Norms are intended to remind us about how we want to treat each other. They help us take risks, work through issues, and communicate well. They should be stated in the positive.

Our Science Team will:

- Start and end on time.
- Ask, "Is this best for students?"
- Listen respectfully, to understand first and respond second.
- Balance participation and share airspace.
- Pause, paraphrase, and probe for specificity.
- Honor diverse perspectives and encourage participation.
- Produce products and celebrate success.
- Do the work in the meeting and not in the parking lot.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Agree to disagree while we are in the room.

To develop norms, see the processes shared by the National Staff Development Council and described in *Learning by Doing* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, pp. 210–212).

Sometimes we hear the comment, "My team is so dysfunctional. They don't trust each another." Remember that teams are comprised of individuals. We are each responsible for productivity and effective communication. As Garmston and Wellman point out, "There is no such thing as group behavior. All 'group behavior' results from the decisions and actions of individuals. When individual choices align in productive patterns, the group produces positive results" (1999, p. 33).

Your team norms will become especially important when you experience conflict. Instead of pointing fingers at individuals, it is helpful to call attention to norms. Placing the norms on the Team Organizer will prevent many negative behaviors. Evaluate your norms two or three times a year. To stay productive, bring attention to them often during regular meetings:

- Ask, "What is working, and what we need to work on at the end of the meeting?"
- Clarify norms before a difficult conversation. Ask team members to paraphrase norms before a difficult conversation and to describe what they see when the norm is being followed during the conversation.
- Ask, "What have we done in the past 3 weeks that demonstrates our commitment to the norms?"
- Brainstorm what each norm looks like and sounds like in meetings.
- Check in at the beginning of a meeting: Ask members, "Describe the norm that will be most important to pay attention to as we work today."

Preventative strategies are intentional. When you expect difficult conversations, spending 5 to 7 minutes to review norms first will pay off substantially.

Decision-Making Process

How will your team make decisions? What type of decision will you use? How will you know when a decision has been made?

The answers to these questions must be explicit and stated before a task. Your team may become confused if they think they are *deciding* something when in reality the team was supposed to be recommending. Recall and state out loud the type of decision you are involved in. Teach the following continuum of decisions to your team so you can use similar language and have shared understanding.

- **Autocratic**—One person will make the decision.
- **Consultative**—One person or one entity will make the decision after they have sought input.

- **Majority**—More than half of the participants agree with the proposal.
- **Near or sufficient consensus**—A predetermined number of participants agree with the proposal. Your team must decide what percentage feels like near consensus.
- **PLC consensus**—All points of view have been considered, and the will of the team is evident, even to those most opposed to it (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Determine how you will demonstrate agreement. Some teams like to use thumbs up or down. It allows every person a visual representation and forces movement. If a team member has his thumb down, he talks about why and explains his concerns. The team can respectfully acknowledge the concerns and then state, "It is clear that the will of the group is to move forward, knowing there may be some concerns." The next step is for everyone to support and implement the decision.

Evaluation of Your Results and Team Time

The final structural and procedural component is checking to see that you are on track. Many teams use a formal survey once or twice a year to collect data and inform leadership. Teams may also use quick tools to check progress on an ongoing basis. Plan for time at the end of each meeting to summarize what you did, name the products created, clarify next meeting's task, and ask simple and quick checkout questions: "What worked for us today?" "What do we need to focus on or do differently next meeting?" Keep changing how you ask, but do not hesitate to ask. Checking shows you care and that you want your team time to be valuable and productive.

4. Process

Process is the method of conducting meetings and engaging participants. It is a series of actions that move teams closer to their goals.

Members will engage and follow a process if they think it will help accomplish the task. They will disengage if they think it is unrelated and too time-intensive. Process must match intended objectives and help you accomplish your goals. Be deliberate and focused on results when determining what process will work best for you.

Grounding and Check

Bob Chadwick (2000), friend and mentor from Terrebonne, Oregon, reminds us that we all have a need to be part of a community. We are not isolated creatures by preference. If we feel connected to each other, we will be more motivated to work together and spend time together.

Begin your meetings with the focus and purpose comments, and then move to a check-in or grounding. We call this step *grounding* because it brings us to the here and now; it establishes our place in the team, and it balances power. We all participate from the very beginning.

Always ask each person: "Please share your name, your expectations for today, and how you feel about being here." Some team leaders like to bypass the last part—"how you feel"—for fear that a teammate might express negative comments. That can happen, but at least then the feelings are public and explicit. It is hard to deal with "under the table" issues.

Ownership and a sense of accountability occur when each person checks in. Over time, teammates will become open during grounding and express real fears and hopes. Grounding establishes a model and a tone for deep listening. Every person will have a voice and be heard, and each person will establish verbal territory. The facilitator or leader will not be doing all the work.

Protocols and Tools

> *Protocols force transparency by segmenting elements of a conversation whose boundaries otherwise blur: talking and listening, describing and judging, proposing and giving feedback.*
>
> —James McDonald et al.

Complex systems such as collaborative teams need collective commitments to be productive. Your team will be more honest and achieve more clarity when members do not worry about "stepping on" each other or become confused about how to participate. Protocols provide consistent structure to conversations and create a sense of safety around expressing opinions. They invite deep thinking and reflection, allowing team members to say what is truly on their minds. The steps will slow the conversation down and stop others from interrupting before their turn. Each team member knows he or she will have an opportunity to speak, thus members stop their inner self-talk and listen to each other more. In other words, protocols "constrain participation in order to heighten it" (McDonald et al., 2007, p. ix).

When choosing protocols, always consider balance. Ask yourself, "How is the process engaging everyone on our team to accomplish our goal?" Remember, your team members have diverse styles of learning. Members are introverts and extroverts with a variety of needs and desires. Be bold! Try different strategies in your team meetings. Observe which protocols served your purpose and helped your team become more productive. Think about all the different instructional strategies you use in your classroom. Many of these work in adult groups, too. Examples include the following:

- **Think, pair, share**—Asking team members to reflect and write about the topic or issue, then partner and share their thoughts
- **Go-round**—Creating a circle and then allowing each person to share to share his or her thoughts in turn

- **Text or "jigsaw"**—Asking each team member to read a section of article or text from a book, summarize key points, meet with an "expert" group to discuss the key points, and then teach the segment to the team or whole group
- **Force-field analysis**—Listing, as a group, the forces restraining and supporting a current situation's improvement

Be intentional with the process and protocols. Be a connoisseur who collects them. Use them to accomplish your goals while at the same time building community.

5. Behaviors and Relationships

> *As a teacher and then as principal, I learned over and over again that the relationship among adults in the schoolhouse has more impact on the quality and character of the school—and on the accomplishment of youngsters—than any other factor.*
>
> —Roland Barth

Individuals want to be connected. We tend to feel a sense of belonging with those we work with. We desire respect from our colleagues and want to be accepted and included in key decisions. Paying attention to the five components of effective collaboration and using the suggestions described in this chapter will provide opportunities for your team to engage in heart-to-heart conversations and break through to more authentic relationships.

But in addition, you must take responsibility for your own interpersonal skills. Communication is like teaching, both an art and a science. Working with our peers can be challenging, especially when we find ourselves with little time and exponential student needs. So practice what works. Attend to both verbal and nonverbal communication. Refer to the following communications tips when you need a refresher or you are finding yourself struggling.

Nonverbal Communication Techniques

- **Listen—**Bend your ears around what the person speaking is saying. Listen to understand first and respond second. Nod, provide eye contact, and show respect by allowing the person to complete his or her thoughts.
- **Pause—**Do not jump into the empty space in a conversation. Allow the speaker 3 to 5 seconds to gather thoughts and provide more detail. Wait until others have contributed.
- **Adjust your voice—**Your tone, inflections, rate, and volume all matter. Use the credible voice to make a point and call for attention. Use the approachable voice to pique interest and involvement. Michael Grinder (1997) describes that our voice patterns will fall somewhere on a continuum between credibility on one end and approachability on the other. The credible voice pattern is used to send information and increase importance. It is characterized by more pauses, intonations that curl down at the end of a statement or word, and the speaker's head holding still when as she delivers the message. The approachable voice includes more head nodding, more rhythmic patterns, and intonations that curl up on the end of a statement or word. Notice what happens when you are conscious of your voice in your team meetings.
- **Adjust your stance and breathing—**Use the frozen gesture (Grinder, 1997) in combination with a pause to hold a listener's attention. Hold your hand waist high or above the table as a way to pace the conversation. Team members won't consciously focus on your hand movement, but they will react to the pause plus a gesture signaling them to wait and let another finish. The frozen gesture can also be used to make a point, pause, and hold the attention of the listener. In addition, your stance and where you place yourself in the group will convey meaning to others. If you stand and talk a lot, it signals "I have

the power" and will do the work. Think about how you sit in relation to your teammates, and balance power by sitting around a circle. When your team hits a snag or disagrees, let all team members voice their point of view; accept the increased volume, passion, and pace of the conversation. If necessary, you can deliberately slow the pace down and help others be resourceful by taking a few deep breaths. This will restore balance, activate higher order thinking, regulate blood flow, and demonstrate that all is well. Our breathing can regulate the energy in the room. Take deep breaths, and notice how you and others around you relax.

Verbal Techniques

- **Reframing—**Turn negative statements or perceptions into positives. It is best to do it without certainty. Example: "He is so stubborn!" Reply: "It seems to me that stubbornness may be a quality of independence and strong conviction. How do those qualities provide value to our team?"
- **Checking perceptions—**Do not jump to conclusions or make assumptions without checking out your perceptions: "Let me check this out. I am thinking this is the will of the group. Am I correct?"
- **Paraphrasing—**Restate what you hear and honor the speaker. Paraphrase to seek agreement, clarify content, summarize, and shift the level of abstraction. Garmston and Wellman (1999) remind us, "Paraphrasing is one of the most valuable and least used communication tools in meetings. . . . Groups that develop consciousness about paraphrasing and give themselves permission to use this reflected tool become clearer and more cohesive about their work" (pp. 39–40). Be as natural as possible when paraphrasing and practice. Examples include: "So you are thinking . . ." "You are suggesting that . . ." "You are

concerned about . . ." "You seem to have two objectives; the first one is . . ." Notice that paraphrases are not questions, but statements that allow others to feel heard and respected.

- **Articulating your point of view—**Tell your truth. Describe what you see from your vantage point, and make clear, actionable requests or statements (Sparks, 2005). Stay away from "but" at the beginning of a sentence. Instead, use: "And, this is another way to think about it . . ." or "My perspective is . . ."

Working Together Effectively

Interpersonal and communication skills combined with the other four elements—focus, roles and responsibilities, structure, and process—do make a difference in your team's results. Decide now that positive and productive meetings are the norm and a standard for your team. Influence through your behaviors and your actions. Keep a relentless focus on student learning, and remember that no amount of reading, contemplating, and talking will substitute for *doing*. Do not hesitate; do something and begin. Take initiative and introduce the content formally to your team, or bring in the ideas through your daily actions. You can improve the quality of your relationships, your interactions, and most importantly, the student learning in your school through your daily leadership.

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