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Building Effective Groups

Meetings are becoming teachers' work. Evidence increasingly shows that collaborative cultures lead to higher student achievement (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Effective and time-efficient meetings have obvious benefits. Well-organized meetings result in groups that produce work important to students; in addition, they promote members' satisfaction and capacity to collaborate, and therefore their willingness to conscientiously contribute. The more groups succeed in getting important work done in meetings, the greater their sense of collective efficacy, a resource undeniably linked to student success (Hoy et al., 2006). Finally, members of successful groups ultimately become members and leaders elsewhere in the system and enrich the quality of work within the school and district.

It is in meetings that teachers work together to improve instructional practice and performance. It is in meetings that teachers clarify policies, identify and address problems, assess standards, and modify schedules. It is in meetings that faculties respond to the changing needs of students, standards, and curriculum demands. It is in meetings that groups mature and manage differences. And it is in meetings that their working culture evolves—or stays the same.

Professional cultures are emerging in schools, and meetings are serving a central role in improving student learning. Sustaining these collaborative, results-focused working relationships requires leaders at all levels of the organization to develop new ways of seeing their work and new templates and tools for engaging collective energy toward common goals. Not only are collaborative groups more effective at complex tasks than individuals working alone, but the group's collective intelligence can be developed.

Most of what we know about meetings in which people plan, solve problems, and make decisions can be attributed to Michael Doyle and David Strauss. In 1976, they published a book called *How to Make Meetings Work*. This codified the best practices for meeting preparation, defining an agenda, facilitating a meeting, managing recording, dealing with disruptions, and other aspects of organizing successful meetings. Their work originated from a project in which they recorded meetings, searching for the fewest common elements that had the greatest impact on successful outcomes. They examined meetings of the boards of directors of institutions such as banks and of less complex organizations like PTAs.

Their work identified five standards that I have seen, time and time again, improve group effectiveness. I often tell groups that these standards will guarantee success, as measured by maximum amount of work done in minimum time with maximum member satisfaction. Actually, on some occasions I have taught the standards and then returned months later to observe progress, only to find no progress at all. The point is that the standards alone are not sufficient; it is how groups work with the standards that makes a difference. Beyond merely introducing the standards, how a group maintains them while moving through the inevitable implementation dip that accompanies any innovation will predict the group's success in that measure—maximum work done, minimum time, maximum member satisfaction.

Five Standards for Effective Meetings

The implementation of these five standards leads to meeting success:

- Address only one topic at a time.
- Use one process at a time.
- Balance participation and make meetings interactive.
- Use cognitive conflict productively.
- Have everyone understand and agree to meeting roles.

Address Only One Topic at a Time

Most of us have experienced the confusion that occurs when a group gets off track. For example, teachers are deliberating over which textbooks to select, and someone mentions that some books are housed in the supply room, leading to a discussion of the orderliness of the supply room and then why no one has cleaned it up yet. This discussion will drive the linear-minded among us nuts, take the meeting in a different direction, and create confusion and frustration.

Who is responsible for keeping the group on track—a facilitator or group members? The answer is both. While a facilitator remains neutral on content, he or she is in charge of process and monitors and redirects the group when necessary. However, informed group members can and should gently remind peers of their agreement to work in accordance with the five standards of effective meetings.

A facilitator might ask, in a spirit of inquiry, “Help us understand how that relates to our topic.” More often than not, the group member will note that the item can be saved for another part of the meeting. Sometimes we are surprised when the participant explains how the idea does, in fact, relate. Another facilitator move is to record the new idea on a flip chart, commenting, “This is important; let’s record it here so we don’t lose it.” Groups appreciate having these comments recorded for later because it keeps the conversation on track yet respects participants and semirelated ideas.

The role of group members, or what Bruce Wellman and I call "engaged participants" (2009), is significant. They frequently guide and help the group stay on track with questions, such as: "I'm confused. Are we still discussing . . ."; "Could you help us understand how your comment connects to this topic?"; or "That's a good thought. Can we save it for later when we get to topic X?" Pointing out where in the conversation the speaker's point may be more relevant can help the speaker feel recognized, but gently guide the conversation back to the issue at hand.

Use Only One Process at a Time

By *process*, I mean any strategy used to deliberate about content. Doyle and Strauss (1976) make a useful distinction between *process* and *content*, describing the former as "chewing" and the latter as "gum." "Chewing" anything, including information, is essential when the goal is understanding.

Brainstorming is an example of a process the rules of which are often violated. The ground rules for brainstorming are to accept and list all contributions without criticism or questions. The moment a question is asked about an item, the process breaks down and a rambling conversation is likely to ensue rather than a return to brainstorming. The facilitator should at once intervene. "Stop," she should say. "Please save that question for later." When each participant knows what process will happen following brainstorming, the group will find it easier to exercise self-discipline to stick to the protocol.

To be certain each member understands the protocol to be used, a facilitator can use a PAG/PAU strategy. In the PAG (process as given) phase, the facilitator outlines the process and the rules for what group members should and shouldn't do. Then the facilitator checks group members' understanding during the PAU (process as understood) phase. The facilitator might ask, "So, what are the ground rules?" "How much time will this take?" "What will you do if you have a question?"

Implicitly, the group has now given the facilitator permission to intervene when an agreed-on process is not followed.

Make Meetings Interactive

Even dedicated, determined group members will be unable to keep information stored in short-term memory without having time to interact with the material. Sitting and listening for lengthy periods is an ineffective way to have human beings retain ideas. The most heroic efforts of group members to stay alert will fail if members are not allowed to engage and be thoughtfully productive, such as in a Pair-Share in which a participant turns to a neighbor and synthesizes what is being said. Any meeting that runs beyond 20 to 30 minutes without group members being directed to check their perception and cement their learning is probably burning out brain cells. Groups can learn a variety of strategies for interaction. In one, members turn to one another and summarize the most important point of the preceding discussion. In another strategy, pairs identify concerns about a topic before a general discussion begins. In yet another, subgroups read and discuss a policy statement to identify concerns to suggest to the full group for discussion. See Garmston and Wellman (2009) for 150 interactive strategies.

Use Cognitive Conflict Productively

When group members bring different points of view and opinions to a discussion, the discussion will lead to better decisions, greater commitment to the outcome, and more follow-through on the decision than in groups that lack such cognitive conflict (Amason, Thompson, Hochwater, & Harrison, 1995). Using the tools described in Chapter 6, groups can learn to set aside *affective conflict*, in which members direct their anger at individuals rather than ideas, and can learn to respect individuals even while disagreeing with their points of view.

Cognitive conflict is essential to high-performing groups. This may seem counterintuitive. Many boards I have dealt with believe that disagreement is a sign of dysfunction. This could not be further from the truth. Cognitive conflict, when members disagree gracefully, is essential to improved outcomes and decision making. Effective groups use norms and tools that allow members to express their differences, to examine assumptions and mental models underlying their different points of view, and to use resolution techniques that provide for the best possible decision. The *best possible* decision may not be each member's first choice, but the pooling of thought and best understanding from all members allows better thinking to arise.

In contrast, ineffective groups either avoid conflict and have members who don't speak out for fear of not "going with the flow," or personalize conflict and blame an individual for having a contrary opinion. Avoiding cognitive conflict leads to poor decisions often made by the leader or the most vocal member of the group. Personalizing cognitive disagreement creates a host of negatives including apathy, balkanization, decreased commitment to the group's purposes, and, always, poor decisions. David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson have researched and written extensively about using conflict constructively. (See their website at http://www.co-operation.org.)

One volunteer board I'm familiar with had regular disagreements over matters large and small, but still was able to come to decisions that generally, when the vote was taken, were unanimous. However, a few members of the board were unhappy that the outcomes did not always completely reflect their opinions even while they ostensibly supported the group decisions by voting for them. They began to criticize the group leader for "causing conflict" and attacked the group for being "broken" because discussion reflected multiple ideas. In the end, the group ousted its chair, numerous other members resigned as a result, and only those of a similar mindset were left on the board. We will see what kinds of decisions the group makes, but I am certain that the absence of any alternative views will lead to much worse decisions and bodes ill for the future of the organization.

It takes time and group maturity for groups to develop the ability to use cognitive conflict productively. The same is true for the next meeting principle, agreeing on roles. For those reasons, both principles are explored in greater depth in later chapters.

Agree on Roles

The most influential role in any group is the role of group member or active participant. Skilled members who know meeting standards and group processes are able to work in harmony across differences to get the greatest value from meeting time. Groups that engage in decision making, planning, or problem solving need a facilitator as well as someone who will take the role of recorder. (In smaller groups, the facilitator does this.) Often, one member of the group is a decision maker—a person with role authority such as the principal, or someone with knowledge-based authority, such as a subject or curriculum specialist for the topic being discussed. Using the decision maker or most knowledgeable person as facilitator robs the group of valuable knowledge that those members can contribute to the discussion. Persons in these roles do the group the most good by functioning as an engaged group member.

Effective principals, superintendents, and content experts shy away from the role of facilitator. Chapter 2 explains why and details the responsibilities of the group member, facilitator, recorder, and leader.

Introducing the Standards

One way to familiarize the group with these five standards is to use part of a meeting to have members list what they like and dislike about their meetings. Usually, enough dissatisfaction emerges about meeting practices that the group is open to learning new ways of doing business.

Another approach is to provide reading material describing the five principles. A good source is the article "The 5 Principles of Effective Meetings" (Garmston, 2006). Use a variety of reading protocols to have participants read, consider, and adopt the principles. Do not, at this time, attempt to modify these principles. A great deal of research and experience serves as a foundation for their effectiveness. Some leaders insist that the principles be followed and assessed at each meeting for at least six sessions. After at least that much experience, a conversations about adaptations may be warranted.

Providing a rationale and discussion on professional communities and why collective work is important to student learning is always a good idea. The work of Karen Seashore Louis and her colleagues (1996) is a good source, as is the synthesis of research in *The Adaptive School* (Garmston & Wellman, 2009). The findings are clear: Groups that are collectively responsive to students' needs and willing to work collaboratively to refine instruction and curriculum show remarkable increases in student learning. Knowledge of how professional communities work provides a compelling rationale for staffs to look at their own practices, including how they manage meetings.

According to Rick DuFour (2004), a professional learning community proponent, an effectively functioning group exhibits three key features. The group

- ensures student learning,
- develops professional collaboration, and
- focuses on results.

So to introduce principles of effective meetings, provide information or start a conversation that either highlights shared dissatisfaction with current practices or offers a vision of how the group's meetings might be more productive and satisfying.

Assessing the Standards

Periodically reviewing the five meeting standards can help remind the group about effective processes and help members

Table 1.1 Five Meeting Standards

Rate how well you believe the group followed our agreed meeting standards. Mark an X under the rating for each standard, with 1 being low and 5 being high.

	1	2	3	4	5
Addressed one topic at a time.					
Used one process at a time.					
Balanced participation.					
Used cognitive conflict productively.					
Understood and followed meeting roles.					

Source: Garmston & Wellman, 2002

reflect about their work. Set up times and create a structure for the group to reflect. Distribute a Likert-type scale questionnaire at the end of each meeting (Garmston & Wellman, 2002, p. 139). Ask members to rate each item from 1 to 5.

The group agrees to designate one person (it may be the same person or a different group member each time) to collect the forms and tally the results. The designated individual should create a visual representation that shows the data and the distribution of responses. The chart or graph should be on display as group members enter the room at the next meeting. The first task is to review the data and respond to the question, "Based on how we assessed ourselves at the last meeting, what should we work on today?"