

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Promoting Collaborative Efforts

A current trend in schools is the opportunity for educators to meet during common planning time within the school day. Specifically, this time is named collaboration and allows for teachers of the same students or grade levels/courses to effectively analyze data, solve problems, plan cross-curricular lessons, or in other similar ways to increase student success through teaming. However, as pointed out in an earlier *CLI Ehint*, simply meeting together to discuss a particular topic is not true collaboration. As pointed out by Douglas Reeves (*Leading Change in Your School – How to Conquer Myths, Build Commitment, and Get Results*) effective collaboration requires time, practice, and accountability – achieved through specific agendas, clearly articulated expected results, and minutes of discussions and decisions. Reeves, Richard DuFour, and other experts in professional learning communities contend that teachers need to be *taught* how to collaborate.

There are numerous sources available for instruction in this area. The Center for Adaptive Schools is one organization that has developed a framework of guidelines. These guidelines include: promoting a spirit of inquiry, pausing, paraphrasing, probing, putting ideas on the table, paying attention to self and others, and presuming positive intentions. Each of these guidelines is described briefly for you here.

Promoting a spirit of inquiry requires one to think about another's ideas before attempting to promote his or her own. Unselfish thought is required to explore other's interpretations before advocating a personal idea.

Pausing before a response can allow time to process what is being discussed. This wait time can encourage conversation and enhance discussion.

Paraphrasing is repeating back to the speaker what was said. Using an opener such as "You're thinking..." allows group members to hear an interpretation of what was said. The speaker can then provide clarification of the idea or other group members can develop a deeper understanding as they form their own opinions.

Probing is a gentle questioning of what someone said. A simple prompt of "Please say more" or "I'm curious about..." allows the speaker to elaborate on his/her opinion without feeling threatened.

Putting ideas on the table must be done in a way that isn't too forward. Introduce an opinion with "Here is one idea" or "A thought that I have is..." In this way, one participant's original thought can be a springboard for meaningful discussion and additional ideas, rather than the only topic.

Paying attention to self and others requires all participants to be aware of what each person is truly saying and meaning. Observe verbal and nonverbal responses to the conversation.

Presuming positive intentions allows for the group to make progress toward the intended goal. Assuming that others are working for the betterment of the group can facilitate the decision making process.

The Center's guidelines also point out that when time is a factor, it is important to set aside which agenda items will be for dialogue, discussion or both. Dialogue allows for free talking in order to have a deeper understanding of the topic. Discussion takes the information acquired during dialogue and its intent is to guide the group toward a decision. Setting a time limit on each topic may be necessary in order to stay on task. Discussion points and any decisions made should be recorded.

Another example of preparing teachers for collaboration is from the work of Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook. They have written extensively about the topic of teacher collaboration, most notably in the numerous editions of their book, *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*. A brief summary of steps they recommend is listed here.

Determine goals and initial structures. The problem must be clearly defined, then teachers tentatively outline the structures through which the goals can be reached.

Plan for implementation. Identify resources needed; note barriers that might prevent implementation, and plan strategies to overcome them; and identify ways the program or service will be evaluated.

Prepare for implementation. Begin to overcome the barriers identified; complete plans in detail; include and train others who need to be involved; order any necessary materials; finalize specific evaluation plans.

Implement the program. Pilot the program and gather implementation data.

Maintain the program. Continue to monitor the program and examine results.

Once again, all plans and decisions should be recorded. Also Friend and Cook stress it is important to distinguish the program or service teachers do collaboratively from the collaboration process itself. Especially when the data indicate problems, the group needs to be able to analyze whether the fault lay with the program or the collaborative steps.

Through collaboration, educators can make a definite impact on student success and failures. Collaborative processes can cause meaningful professional conversations through a protocol, and develop building leaders who can support future collaborative efforts. The important thing is to select a specific collaboration model, and adhere to its guidelines.