collaborative culture / ROBERT J. GARMSTON

RESULTS-ORIENTED AGENDAS TRANSFORM MEETINGS INTO VALUABLE COLLABORATIVE EVENTS

WITH DEBBIE WELCH

Creating a culture of inquiry rather than continuing to work in a culture of isolation represents a significant change within schools that must be supported. Systems successful in improving student learning are characterized by:

- Articulated norms and values;
- A focus on student learning;
- Reflective dialogue;
- Collaborative practices; and
- Deprivatization of teaching (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

To impact student learning, staff groups must "engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions that investigate the relationships between instructional practices and student work" (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

Reaching a level at which instructional conversations take place, however, requires leadership, focus, and skill development.

Leaders must support the move toward instructional conversations by providing a variety of resources, including time, space for groups to meet and talk, and materials of inquiry, such as flip charts, pens, and electronic devices. Leaders also provide an instructional focus and structures and protocols for collegial conversations.

Often, when educators are attempting to create cultures of inquiry, teachers focus initially on planning special events, arranging schedules, and other administrivia. It is tough to get departments, grade-level teams, articulation groups, student study groups, and other teams to have efficient processes that guide their time together.

Focusing instructional conversations is a major accomplishment in any meeting, including teacher meetings where history has favored working in isolation. Many groups do not have the skills to construct an agenda based on learning outcomes and processes. The right agenda template saves time, develops teams, and increases productivity.

At the International School Bangkok, we began work on developing a culture of inquiry by analyzing 16 hours of meeting agendas to determine the percentage of time spent on administrivia versus teaching and learning topics. The agendas were provided by department heads, instructional team leaders, and grade-level leaders. Analysis of the agendas revealed that more than 60% of groups' time was spent on administrative issues, such as calendars, short-term scheduling, arranging special events, and discussing policies. The school's administrators and teacher leaders knew they had a problem to solve if they wanted to truly move toward a learning community in which teachers engaged in instructional conversations.

The first step was to refocus staff members' energy during the time they spent together. The most efficient and effective means of doing so was to begin with the end in mind — spend time addressing the expected outcomes by stating the purpose of group time through a clearly outlined agenda.

Leaders at the school gave learning teams four different templates. These leaders, including the deputy superintendent, had already spent time, along with many staff, learning more about creating a collaborative culture through improving groups' ability to focus their inquiry.

Modeling their learning, the superintendent, administrators, and teachers facilitated staff and team meetings that were more efficient, inclusive, and focused on meaningful student learning topics. Facilitators saved the agenda formats electronically to share them with other groups and allow them to be adapted to fit specific groups and issues. The results-oriented agendas provided open time to analyze test data, examine student work, score common assessments, discuss effective lessons, and talk with other grade levels.

By improving the meeting agenda, groups clarified their outcomes and purposes, reduced meeting time, and increased time spent on student learning issues.

How can something as simple as an agenda template have a significant impact? A well-designed agenda focuses on results. It shows topic, purpose, guiding questions, and background or process. A well-constructed agenda includes:

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.**

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Meeting outcomes:

Identify the outcome(s) of the meeting. An agenda with several topics may have several outcomes. Reviewing outcomes with participants at the beginning of the meeting helps to "start with the end in mind." Good outcomes describe a product, not a process. They record the desired result and offer evidence that the group has achieved its outcomes. To draft a team goal is a product. To discuss data about reading scores describes what members will do in pursuit of an outcome, but does not describe an outcome.

Topics:

Think about the sequence of meeting topics. Topics launch the group into action and need to be aligned with meeting outcomes and guiding questions. Which topic makes sense to discuss first? What issues need to be addressed at the beginning because information is required that will help a group get from the starting point to its outcome? Handle issues that may involve disagreements early so the group can come together before members depart.

Plan an opening that sets the tone and enables participants to understand outcomes and processes. Activate prior knowledge about the first topic to get minds and voices, as well as bodies, in the room. Allow for a closing topic that ensures clarity on group decisions and next steps. Put on the agenda who is to do what by when to guarantee the meeting will end with closure.

Purpose:

Label the purpose of each topic. The purpose may be to dialogue (understand); inform (announcements); recommend (to another decision-making body); or decide (discussion leading to a decision). Thinking through purposes clarifies the group's role and contributes to trust as members become clear about their roles and what is expected of them in decision making. Keep information items to a minimum or eliminate them. Much information can be communicated more efficiently in other ways, such as through e-mail.

To learn more
An example of a well-constructed meeting agenda is included with the web version of this article.

Guiding questions:

Construct engaging questions that encourage group members to probe topics at a deeper level before group work. Think through questions group members need to address and in what sequence.

Background/process:

Summarize information that participants need before they respond to the guiding questions. What is the history that led up to the task? Define unfamiliar terms.

Describe any processes the group will use to accomplish each task. Will the group be using a protocol? Making a decision using a consensus process? Analyzing cause/effect of data with a fishbone diagram?

Person/time:

Identify the person responsible for each task to alert the individual to the need to prepare.

Include an estimate of time needed for each item on the agenda. Estimating time helps ensure that the agenda has been thoughtfully constructed and the tasks are not too ambitious for the time allotted. Topics that have processes, such as a protocol, need extra time for explanation and modeling.

If we want to improve student learning in our schools, we must improve our professional practices. Being effective and efficient with our collaborative time is essential. An agenda template can be a powerful device for advancing our work so that we can focus on our core purpose — student learning.

REFERENCES

Louis, K., Marks, H., & Kruse, S. (1996). Teachers' professional community in restructuring schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 33*(4), 757-798.

Supovitz, J. & Christman, J.B. (2003, November). *Developing communities of instructional practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia.* (CPRE Policy Brief, RB-39). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education. ■

MEETING AGENDA

Meeting outcome: Revise and finalize the rubric for the common assessment
Name of team/group: _____
Facilitator: _____ **Recorder:** _____
Other participants: _____
Starting/ending times: _____
Purposes: Understanding, Informing, Recommending, Deciding

TOPIC	PURPOSE	GUIDING QUESTIONS	BACKGROUND/PROCESSES	PERSON/TIME
Welcome and overview of meeting outcomes and topics.	Informing	What do we hope to accomplish at this meeting?	Ann will review what has been done since the last meeting and explain the outcomes and topics for this meeting.	Ann 3 min.
Inclusion activity to get voices in the room and to celebrate learning.	Under-standing	What learning can we celebrate this week?	We'll go round-robin to share a learning success with a student or an activity/strategy that worked.	Ann 7 min.
Rubric for the common assessment.	Deciding	-Does the rubric help students focus on the critical benchmarks for the unit? Are the rubric's criteria the right criteria? -Does the rubric adequately discriminate among degrees of understanding and proficiency?	We tried the writing rubric for the first time for the common assessment. At this meeting we will: • Look once again at the unit's benchmarks and determine whether the criteria are the right criteria • Share observations about using the rubric to determine levels of understanding and proficiency. In order to do this, please bring student papers that you scored at standard, as well as above and below and any observations you made while scoring. • Make adjustments to the rubric based upon our observations.	Sandy 60 min.