

Departmental Action Teams

Norms of Collaboration

Adapted from ThinkingCollaborative.com

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing involves recasting another's thoughts into one's own words. Paraphrasing helps to reduce group tension by communicating an attempt to understand another. Paraphrasing can advance the conversation when it is used to: (1) acknowledge and clarify what has been said; (2) summarize and organize ideas; and (3) shift the focus of the conversation to a higher or lower level of abstraction (e.g. providing examples, making generalizations, or observing cross cutting themes). Using different types of paraphrasing help members of a team hear and understand each other as they evaluate data and formulate decisions. It is helpful when the speaker signals their intention to paraphrase ("So, you're suggesting...", or "I think I'm hearing . . .") and focuses the paraphrase to a level that helps further the group's thinking.

Pausing

Pausing slows down the conversation. It provides for "wait time," which has been shown to dramatically improve thinking. It signals to others that their ideas and comments are worth thinking about, dignifies their contributions, and implicitly encourages future participation. Pausing enhances understanding and questioning, and greatly increases the quality of decision making. In cultures that don't often promote introspection, pausing inherently changes the rhythm of discourse. Requesting a pace change (e.g., "could we take a minute to think more about this before responding") can be helpful in promoting pausing over time.

Paying attention to self and others

Collaborative work is facilitated when each team member is explicitly conscious of self and others: be aware of information shared, and how it is said, and how others are responding to it. As we pay attention to someone else's way of processing information, we are better able to communicate with them. When we pay attention to self and others, we recognize when we may have been speaking too much or too little. When others may not have had equitable opportunities to share, we invite them to do so. It is helpful to be curious about other people's impressions and understandings, but not judgmental.



Photo by Gaeatus26 "Venediger-Seilschicht Am Gipfelgrat"





U.S. Air Force photo by J.M. Eddins Jr.

Practicing cultural proficiency

The intention of practicing cultural proficiency is to seek perspectives, knowledge, and skills in order to promote inclusion, equity, and social justice. Individuals and teams developing cultural proficiency recognize that multiple viewpoints enrich group expertise, and seek out viewpoints that are not represented. Cultural proficiency is grounded in the understanding that none of us is ever fully culturally proficient. Those who work toward cultural proficiency recognize their learning is never complete and that their way may not be the only or “best” way. They recognize the systemic nature of oppression and the need to take small and large actions that advance an equitable society.

Practicing cultural proficiency requires individuals to understand their own cultures and identities, and to recognize they may have societal privileges which disadvantage others. People practicing cultural proficiency seek out and honor the histories, perspectives, and cultural practices of others. They regularly reflect on their own progress toward being more informed, skilled in action, and inclusive.

Probing for specificity

Probing seeks to clarify terminology, information, ideas, feelings or perceptions that are not yet fully understood. Probing can be either specific or open-ended, depending upon the circumstances. One might ask, “Tell me more about. . .” or “What makes you say that?” or “I didn’t understand your meaning, could you explain?” Recognize that care is needed in probing as the tone of voice used could feel supportive, harsh, or intimidating. It is helpful to ask for clarification of vague nouns and pronouns (e.g., “they”), action words (e.g., “improve”), comparators (e.g., “best”), rules (e.g., “should”), and universal quantifiers (e.g., “everyone”).

Presuming positive intentions

This is the assumption that other members of the team are acting from positive and constructive intentions, even if we disagree with their ideas. Presuming positive intentions is not a passive state. Disagreement, in the spirit of greater understanding, is sought out and often shows up in a “yes, but” or “yes, and” format. Presuming positive intentions is a foundation of trust. It promotes healthy disagreement, and reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and emotional conflict.

Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry

Both advocacy and inquiry are necessary components of collaborative work. The intention of advocacy is to influence others’ thinking; the intention of inquiry is to understand their thinking. Highly effective teams consciously attempt to balance these two components. Inquiry provides for greater understanding. Advocacy leads to decision making. Maintaining a balance between advocating for a position and inquiring about the positions held by others helps create a genuine learning community and the synergy needed to accomplish great work.

Putting ideas on the table and pulling them off

Ideas are the heart of a meaningful conversation. Members need to feel safe to put their ideas on the table for consideration. To have an idea be received in the spirit in which you offer it, label your intentions: “This is one idea...” or “Here’s a thought...” In advanced functioning groups, once an idea is “put on the table” it is often owned by the group and examined for utility on its merits rather than perceiving ideas to be owned by specific individuals. Recognizing when an idea may be blocking dialogue or “derailing” the process is equally important. In this case, it’s helpful to suggest the group “consider taking this off the table”.