Tools to Support Work Area 4

Creating Conditions and Habits for Shared Responsibility

Tools to Support Work Area 4:

Create Conditions and Habits for Shared Responsibility

Work Area 4 offers tools that can support schools to build school members' capacity to lead and collaborate through structures, skills and habits.

Key Questions When Working on This Area:

- How will you work intentionally toward a cohesive youth-centered school vision?
- What structures will facilitate shared decision-making in your school?
- How will you help teachers develop collaborative skills and habits?

Key Questions To Reflect on Your Progress in This Area:

- How do staff habits, processes, and structures align with the vision?
- How do staff habits, processes. and structures support cross-functional collaboration and decision-making?

Activities

- **Inclusive Communication and Shared Decision-Making:** *An activity guide for creating communication and decision-making processes.*

Resources

- **Renewing School: Productive Dialogue and Difficult Conversations:** An effective practice brief that provides guidelines for productively working through conflict through active listening, compassion, and a goal of collective understanding

Inclusive Communication and Shared Decision-Making

How can we involve all school members in realizing our vision?

PURPOSE:

This activity helps define communication and decision-making processes involving all school members.

AUDIENCE:

School leadership team (ideally with a representative from all school members: administrators, community school, after-school staff, teachers, parents, students)

TIME:

2-3 hours (This could be done over multiple sessions)

OUTCOME(S):

As a result of this activity, we will have:

- A visual representation of a communication and/or decision-making process involving all school members.

MATERIALS:

- A Comparison of Classical Leadership and Shared Responsibility handout
- Inclusive Communication and Shared Responsibility Decision-Making Directions handout
- Flip chart paper and markers for each team

INTRODUCTION (45-60 MINUTES**)**

1. Ask participants to use A Comparison of Classical Leadership and Shared Responsibility handout to share some of the benefits and drawbacks of a shared responsibility model.

   Some benefits might include:

   - Ownership and buy-in and thus increased commitment by all members
   - Increased trust between school members and likelihood that all adults are communicating consistent messages to students and collectively finding strategies to meet the needs of all students
   - It's necessary that teachers have voice, if students are to have voice

   Some drawbacks of shared responsibility might include:

   - Collaboration takes time and coordination
   - It can be difficult to come to consensus, particularly with large groups
   - Emphasis on process can be frustrating for those who are results-oriented and can cause the group to lose sight of the purpose or focus

2. *Key frame:* Not all school decisions can be made using consensus or shared responsibility; however, if shared responsibility processes are used in a few identified areas, it can greatly increase school member commitment, cohesion, consistency, and investment in collectively carrying out the vision. Clear/frequent communication and transparent decision-making processes clarify how and when they can be involved in informing or shaping the school vision. (By consensus, we mean that all members can live with and support the final decision.)

3. *For both decision-making and communication*—Brainstorm the different school members and existing groups that might currently organize/represent these groups. (These might include existing teacher groups such as grade level or departments, parent groups, student council or other student groups, etc.)

4. *For decision-making*—Brainstorm the types of decisions that might be made though a shared responsibility process versus those that must be decided by the district or principal alone, such as personnel decisions or issues of compliance. (Alternatively, the principal could provide decisions s/he is comfortable opening to a shared responsibility process. Categorize these into major themes such as climate policies, instructional policies, safety policies, etc.)

5. *For communication*—Look at the categories of decisions and decide whether there is any additional vision-related information that might need to be communicated to school members or might require input from school members. Add these categories.
6. Go over the Inclusive Communication and Shared Responsibility Decision-Making Directions.
7. Divide the leadership team in half. Ask one half to focus on communication and the other on decision-making.

ACTIVITY (30-45 MINUTES)

1. Ask participants to design decision-making and communication processes in separate groups.
2. Participants should draw this process on flip chart paper and be prepared to explain the process.

CLOSING (1 HOUR TO 1 HOUR 15 MINUTES)

1. Ask each group to share their proposed process and hear feedback from the other group using the following round robin process. Ask each member to share:
   - One thing they like about the proposed process
   - Any questions or concerns they have about the proposed process.
2. Summarize benefits and concerns heard from the group.
3. Ask the group for proposed modifications to the proposed process to address concerns.
4. Check for group consensus on the process.
5. Decide on next steps for implementing the proposed processes and clear assignments of responsibility for these next steps.

Facilitator Tips

We had difficulties arriving at this activity. We found that school members were particularly attached to their existing structures and processes and had difficulty thinking about how to consolidate, streamline, or connect existing communication structures.

We found it more effective to have participants think about the different school members and the existing groups they might be currently organized into that could be connected to a process and how these groups might be involved in either communication or decision-making as separate processes.

As such, we suggest either tackling communication and decision-making in separate meetings or splitting up the group to focus on these separately.

A COMPARISON OF CLASSICAL LEADERSHIP AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Classical Leadership

- Leadership determined by a person's position or title in a group
- Leadership evaluated by whether the leader solves problems
- Leaders provide solutions and answers
- Distinct differences between leaders and followers: character, skill, etc.
- Communication is often formal
- Can often rely on secrecy, deception and payoffs of various kinds to garner the support of others within the organization

Shared Responsibility

- Leadership determined by the quality of people's interactions rather than their position within the group
- Leadership evaluated by how people are working together toward a common vision
- All members of the group work to enhance the collaborative process and to make it more fulfilling
- People are interdependent—all are active participants in the process of leadership
- Communication is crucial with an emphasis on conversation
- Values democratic processes, honesty and shared ethics - seeks a common good

Drawing from material in Gloria Nemerowicz and Eugene Rosi (1997) *Education for Leadership and Social Responsibility*, London: Falmer Press. Page 16.

Inclusive Communication and Shared Responsibility Decision-Making Directions

How can we involve all school members in realizing our vision?

PURPOSE:

- To define some communication and decision-making processes involving all school members.

AUDIENCE:

School leadership team (ideally with a representative from all school members: administrators, community school, after-school staff, teachers, parents, students)

ACTIVITY DIRECTIONS (30-45 MINUTES)

1. Identify the type of process you are designing (communication or decision-making).

   (See examples on subsequent pages).

2. Thinking about the kinds of communication or decisions the whole group brainstormed, identify the core focus or goal of the process you are designing.

   Examples:

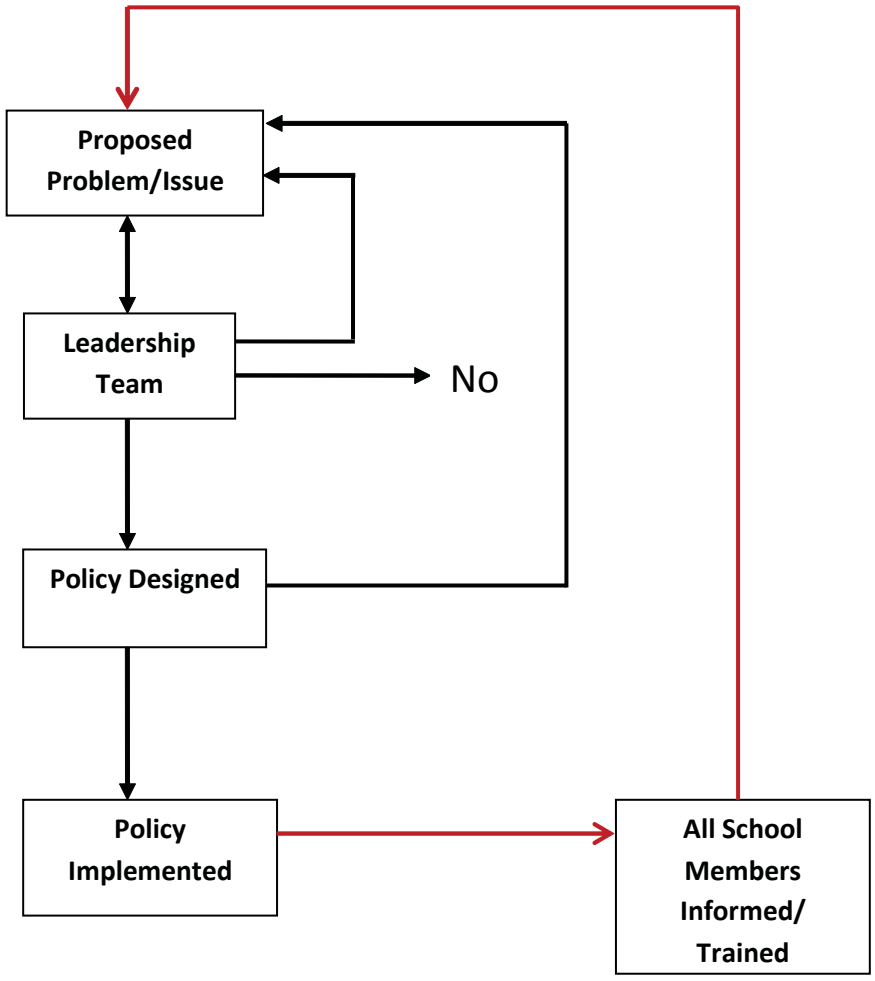
   - If it's a communication flow chart, the ultimate goal might be to communicate decisions-made/ lessons learned to all school members
   - If it's a decision-making flow chart, the ultimate goal might be to make decisions on new school policies

3. Thinking about the different school member groups that the whole group brainstormed (e.g., departments, classified staff, PTA, student council), discuss how each group will be represented in giving input on decisions or receiving and sharing information with others in their team.
4. Discuss and diagram a process for making a decision or communicating information to and from the school as it relates to the identified goal of the process. Use as few words as possible in your diagram. Detailed descriptions of the process should be completed separately from the visual.
5. On the decision-making chart, be sure to clearly delineate where input is asked for versus where decisions are actually made. Some additional questions to consider:

   - How will the decision-making body ensure parent and student input informs decisions affecting these school members?
   - How will decisions be made? (Consensus is recommended for greater commitment from school members and to truly encourage consideration of all perspectives. If consensus is used, those who cannot live with and support a decision are given the opportunity to voice concerns and propose alternative solutions they can live with before a final decision is made.)

SAMPLE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS #1

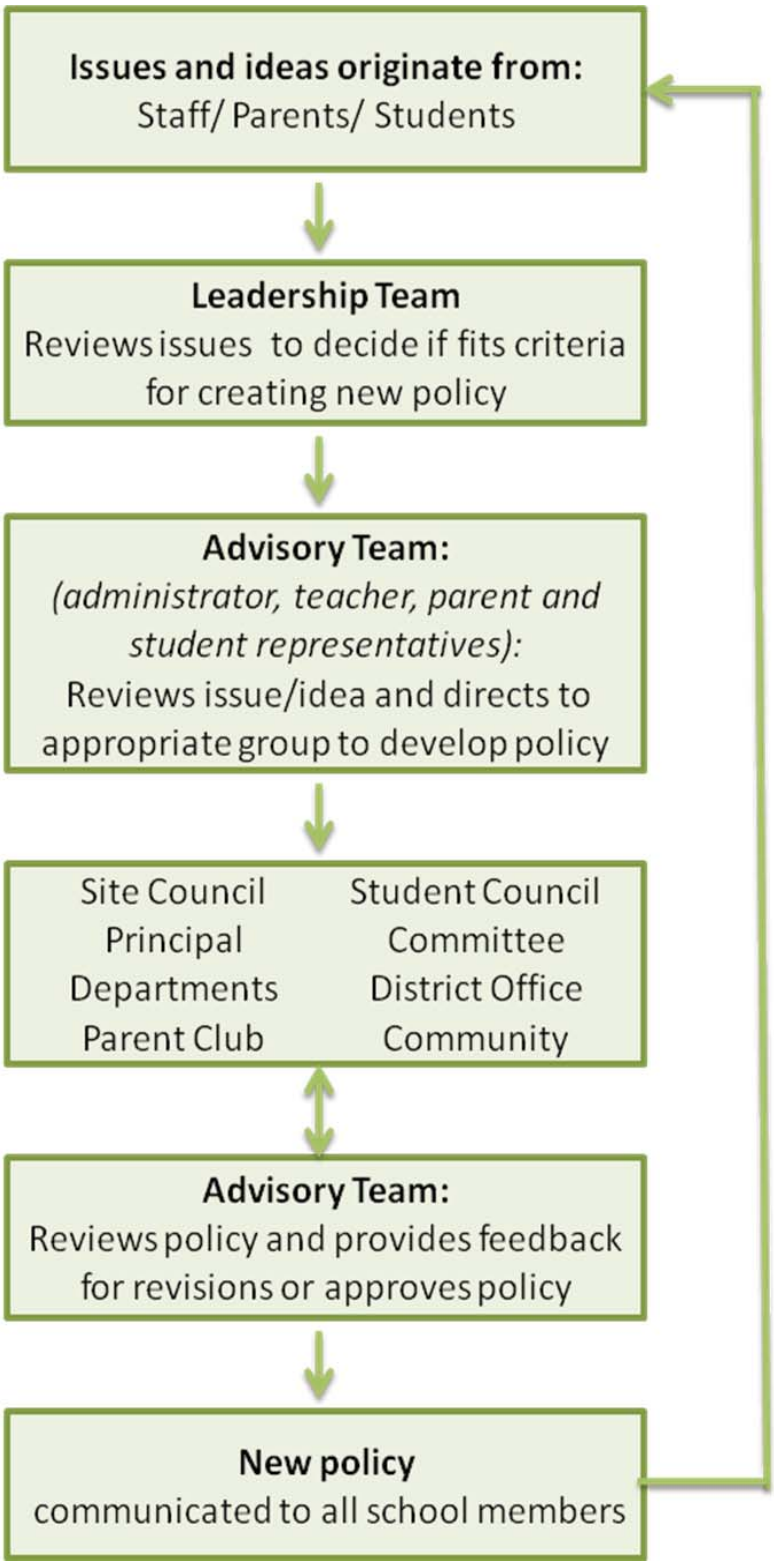
PURPOSE: This flow chart shows the process for making decisions about new school-wide policies



SAMPLE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS #1 EXPLANATION

1. Every school member has a representative on the leadership team.
2. Based on evaluation or other data sources, any school member can raise an issue to the attention of the leadership team through their representative.
3. The leadership representative brings these issues to the Leadership Team who uses criteria (e.g., alignment with the school vision, feasibility of addressing with available resources, level of priority, relevant existing structures that could be leveraged, etc.) to decide if the issue is one that needs to be addressed or not and how it should be addressed.
4. The proposer is given feedback on their proposed issue on whether to go forward or not and with whom. (They may be given criteria to follow and directed to work with an existing committee or to pull together representatives of appropriate school members, to gather additional data etc.).
5. Once the policy is designed, it is brought to the Leadership Team again who reviews it and provides feedback for revision.
6. One the policy is revised to something the Leadership Team members all agree to support, it is implemented and communicated to all school members who are affected by the policy. If training is required that is also provided.
7. The policy is assessed for effectiveness and may bring up new issues that would then be directed through the process.

SAMPLE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS #2



SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PROCESS #1

PURPOSE: To gather input from all school members on important school policies and to share information on the results of this input with all school members.

[1] The green circle above represents the group of people who would be part of the staff meeting/email - ALL administrators/teachers, some staff, parents, and students.

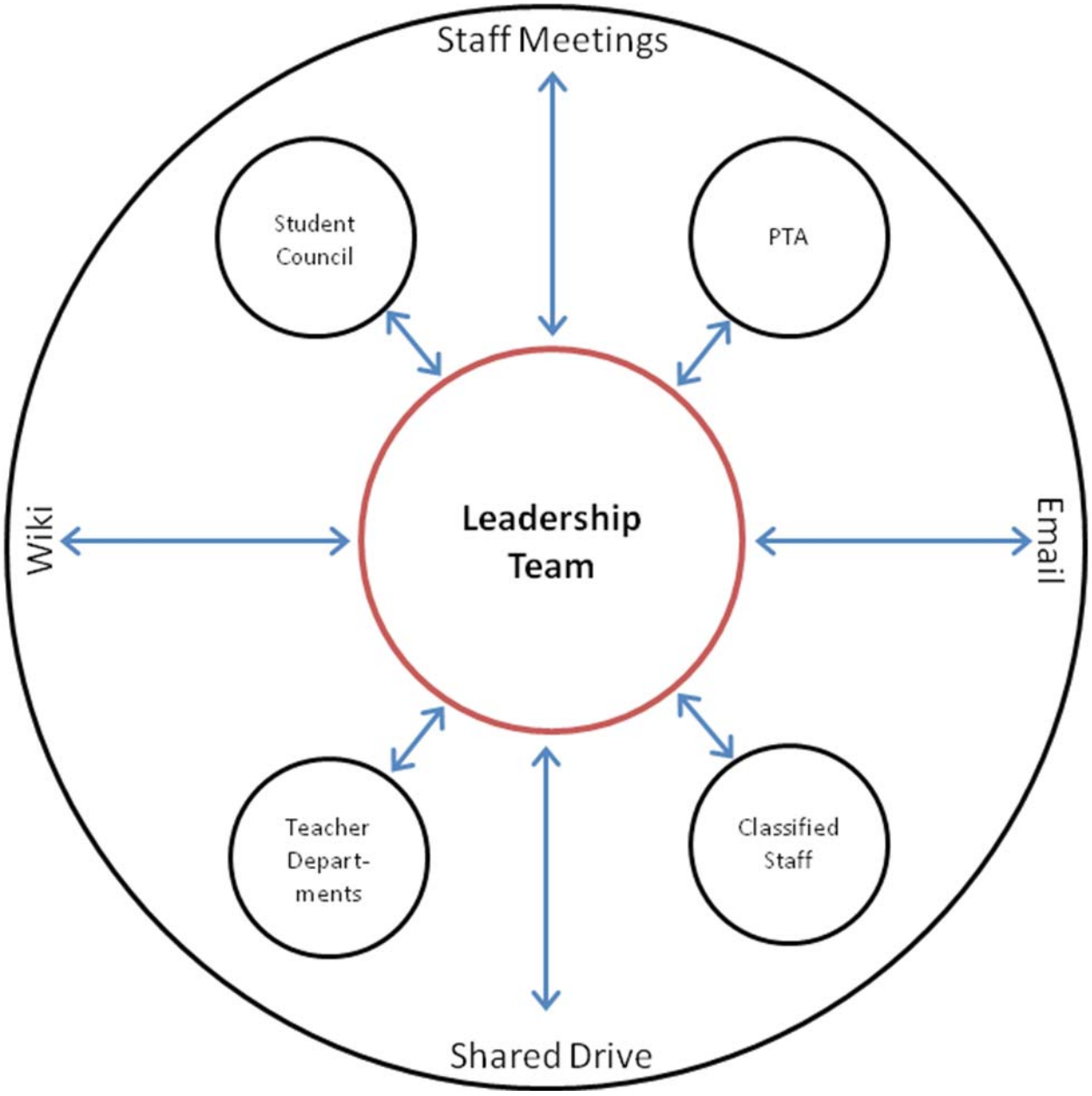
SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PROCESS #1 EXPLANATION

- Every staff member belongs to a group.
- Parents and students have representatives on parent and student committees.
- Every group has a representative on the Leadership Team and at staff meetings. Representatives are expected to communicate with all members of the group for which they are representing.

1. The Leadership Team initiates the need for a new or revised policy based on issues raised by representatives.
2. The Leadership Team either delegates the working of the policy to a committee or works on it within the Leadership Team.
3. Input for ideas is invited from all school members (or representatives of school member groups) at staff meeting, group meetings, or via email.
4. The Leadership Team (or committee) uses input to design the new policy.
5. Feedback on the proposed policy is invited through email, team meetings, or staff meeting.
6. New policy is shared with all school members at staff meeting, via email, and on the Web site.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PROCESS #2

PURPOSE: To gather input from all school members on new structures/processes and to share information on these structures as they develop with all school members.



SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PROCESS #2 EXPLANATION

- Every school member belongs to a group.
- Every group has a representative on the Leadership Team.
    1. Leadership Team representatives raise issues heard from groups at Leadership Team meetings.
    2. Leadership Team members rotate facilitation of staff meetings focused on a particular issue/problem to gather staff ideas.
    3. Leadership Team members take ideas and work on a proposed solution.
    4. Leadership Team members bring proposed solution to their groups for input (or by email or on the Wiki).
    5. The Leadership Team revises solutions, posts them on the Shared Drive and emails staff.

Renewing School: Productive Dialogue and Difficult Conversations

Christina M. O'Guinn, Matt S. Giani and Kristin Geiser

We must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits, but also to serve our students well.

- Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach

INTRODUCTION

As we collectively work to help our students reach their full potential in all facets of their development and to create a school environment that will foster this success, the way we talk with one another will necessarily change. In fact, to renew our school in ways that support youth to thrive, we will need to engage in a specific form of talk. We will need to engage in dialogue that (1) deepens understanding among all involved in the school change process, and (2) makes positive changes for youth in our setting.

What does this look like? How can we move from where we are—our current habits of collaborative conversations—to where we need to be? And how do we handle conversations that are particularly difficult or tense?

WHAT DOES PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE LOOK LIKE?

In the context of moving toward a youth development focus in a school setting, productive conversations are often characterized by:

- **Shared understanding of the big picture.** Participants know or are working toward developing a shared understanding of what they are working for as a community. They understand the context in which their work—including a conversation—sits. They see each conversation as an opportunity to move closer to or further from their big goal and they choose to engage in ways that move closer to the goal.
- **Mutual respect among participants.** Participants truly value the perspectives, voices, stories, ideas, and experiences of one another. Participants know that their own experience is one of many and they will only promote youth development when they are able to hear more from their colleagues and/or other constituents who know the experiences of youth.
- **Clarity of purpose.** Participants understand and agree with the purpose of the conversation. They know what they are working toward—and what the outcome of the conversation needs to be. They work together toward that goal, naming related topics, subjects, or questions as they come up; knowing when to engage those new ideas and when to save them for a later date.
- **They know what they know…and what they don't.** Participants are honest about what they know—and how they know it (e.g., they acknowledge when they are speaking from personal experience and when they are quoting others). They use evidence to support their concerns, but also understand that they have blind spots and partial understandings. They recognize that they need others' knowledge and perspectives. They frequently say, "I don't know," and they know when to seek more information or expertise.
- **Opportunity for deepening understanding.** Time is allotted—and respected—for listening carefully, asking clarifying questions, and sitting with new knowledge. Structures and/or norms are in place to ensure that there is time for listening and learning without any pressure to place value on the ideas, to make decisions, or to draw conclusions.
- **Opportunity for making positive changes.** Participants hold themselves accountable to identifying next steps and for articulating how those actions will directly result in a setting that supports youth to thrive. It may be a "long chain" between the action and impact, but the participants are able to articulate the link(s) and question their assumptions in order to tune their theory of action.
- **Plan for follow-up.** Participants agree to the next conversation(s) that need to happen, with whom and how/when those will happen. They also clarify how they will follow up on anything that came up during this conversation (e.g., find expertise or information on a topic). Participants acknowledge that either they need a concrete follow-up plan or they need to let something go; they are in the habit of making this an intentional choice rather than a default decision.

HOW DO WE MOVE FROM WHERE WE ARE TO WHERE WE NEED TO BE, IN TERMS OF OUR HABITS AROUND CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUE?

In any school change process, there are several different types of change that are being pursued. Some changes are "structural" or "technical" changes, such as changing the bell schedule. There may be a tremendous amount of work done that leads to the changing of the bell schedule, however, the actual change itself requires resetting the bells. It's a technical change. Once the bell schedule has been reprogrammed, the bell schedule will change. Examples of other structural changes are physical like new paint colors or buildings.

Other changes are "infrastructure" changes, which may be necessary in order to allow different people to talk and work together in different ways as they jointly engage in change. These might include the creation of new processes or systems like Learning Action Communities or other collaborative teams or new decision-making bodies/processes that may replace or supplement existing infrastructure. These can also include the use of new processes in existing teams or the integration of similar efforts (such as separate homework clubs) into a single, school-wide program. The nature of infrastructure changes is that they can and should be dynamic and changing with the needs of the school community.

Another type of change is "cultural" or "normative" such as the essence of the school, the feel of the school, and the deep values or beliefs that permeate the school. There may be a tremendous amount of work done that leads to a new school culture or school norms but, unlike structural changes, the work is not done once the shift has happened. Cultural changes happen over time and are sustained or deepened over time by developing new habits. It's a lot like improving one's level of fitness. It doesn't happen just because you make a decision to be more fit; it happens as a result of the consistent practice of new habits that have demonstrated results. It is essential that these habits be practiced in informal conversations (school hallways, school parking lots, staff lounges) as well as formal conversations (staff meetings, school events, parent/teacher conferences). The following describes habits that apply to both settings, but are particularly relevant to informal settings.

WHAT ARE THESE HABITS?

- **Speak up.** If something is on your mind, ask for conversation around it. Initiate the meeting. Invite people into your room or a common space for a dialogue. Do not wait for someone else to start the conversation.
- **Slow Down.** Take the time to intentionally notice where others are at, to really listen, and to work together to address core issues that are affecting our goals for our youth. Because of the immediacy of so much of our work in schools, we have developed habits of dealing with what feels urgent but not necessarily what is important. If comments are made or processes are in place that make it hard for youth to thrive, it is imperative that we slow down long enough to reexamine such ideas or practices. If conversations tend to be fast, fragmented, and covering multiple topics, create space and ask to stay on one topic longer in order to work it through. On the other hand, if conversations tend to be quiet and few are participating, open up the conversation by asking for everyone to weigh in with a simple prompt (e.g., thumbs up, thumbs down, and thumbs in the middle). The simple act of authentically pursuing better understanding of someone/something will shift the normal flow of talk in many school settings and is vital in becoming a proactive, collaborative school community.
- **Affirm.** When you see normative change happening in ways that benefit youth, affirm those who are involved. Name it. Acknowledge what is going well. We need powerful examples to remind us what we are working toward, and to show us that it is possible. Highlight these.

WHAT ABOUT CONVERSATIONS THAT ARE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT OR TENSE?

Difficult conversations are those conversations that we are often afraid to begin—times when we've thought about whether it would be worth it to approach someone about a concern, a remark, or action that bothered us or a decision that we didn't understand. Perhaps we found it easier to ignore it or to complain about it to someone else rather than speak directly to the person. Conversations in which we find ourselves having some sort of physical response (e.g., strong feelings, increased heart rate) usually signal that we are entering into a difficult conversation. In school settings, difficult conversations are often those around our practice, our effectiveness, and/or our students. Some of the most difficult conversations are those that go even deeper and require us to critically and honestly examine the relationship between our ideas or assumptions, our practices, and our students. Indeed the core of successful conversations is to slow down enough to truly understand where someone else is coming from and to develop empathy for that person.

Keep in mind that the purpose of engaging in a difficult conversation should be the same as the purpose of engaging in any school conversation. To come out on the other side better equipped (individually and collectively) to support youth to thrive. To that end, it is essential to clarify the heart of the conversation. "What is it that we are talking about here?" or "What is it that we see that concerns us?" This reminds us that

we need to be able to articulate our question or concern in terms of youth development —and if we cannot, the chances are that we are talking about something that is too far removed from our larger goals and therefore perhaps better to table or discuss in another setting.

Unfortunately, we can't table all of the difficult conversations—in fact, we need to lean into them. Change involves growth; growth involves disequilibrium. And so we need to enter into these difficult conversations—conversations where we experience disequilibrium—as signposts that we are moving in the right direction.

SO HOW MIGHT WE GO ABOUT HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS?

Having these conversations is an art, not a science. There are a number of guidelines you can follow as a framework to initiating and managing these conversations in a safe, productive way. It might be helpful to think of these principles as a means of re-framing the conversation, or a way to turn a really difficult conversation into a less charged, more productive conversation.

- **Assume good intentions.** When you're listening to your colleagues, remind yourself that they have good intentions and that we all want what is best for our youth. Assume that they want to serve all youth, that they are doing their best, and that it is possible to engage in a productive conversation with them.
- **Cultivate curiosity.** Step back into a place of wonder. Consider what you want to know. Cultivate curiosity. What do you wonder about? (e.g., What is the person feeling? What led them to a particular conclusion or opinion? What is the story behind the comment? Does the person know how their comment affected others?) When you are genuinely curious, then begin—and ask clarifying questions that invite dialogue.
- **Remember that we are human.** It's very possible that the person's statement or action doesn't reflect what the person really values or believes but came out of frustration or a misunderstanding. We all say things that do not fully reflect our character. We would not want to be labeled or categorized or written off for one offense; we need to extend this same courtesy to others.
- **Remember that we are in process.** One of the riskiest things we can do is grow, because it necessitates acknowledging that we didn't have it right or that we didn't have it all together. We are often aware that we are in process. Our beliefs, ideas, and opinions are constantly being refined and transformed. Keep in mind that this is true for those around you.
- **Be honest about what feels difficult.** If you find yourself in a difficult conversation, it may help you and others if you say out loud what feels difficult to you (e.g., "I'm feeling attacked right now, so it's really hard for me to engage in this thoughtfully. Could someone help me see this differently so that I don't feel so defensive?" or "I'm afraid that if we talk about race, I am going to be accused of being a racist. How can we do this in a way that I will not feel attacked?") Share these with humility and with an honest effort to communicate your fear and your desire to engage.
- **Model that you are open to change yourself.** If you hear something that feels new or different to you —or even something familiar that is sitting differently this time—be sure to say this out loud. Share your process (e.g., "I hadn't thought of X before, so now I really want to think about how I do Y." or, "I appreciate hearing your story about X because it is so different from my experience. It makes me realize how much I don't know about this topic." or, "I would like to hear more of your stories, because I think that will help me serve my students better.")
- **Move from black/white to gray.** It is easy to slip into debate mode, into a conversation where we force complex ideas and experiences into categories of either/or and right/wrong. In difficult conversations, it is important to move away from this dynamic and to explore the complexities and subtleties of a situation, considering that multiple sides may be of value.
- **Move from I/You to "We."** Move the conversation from a difficult interaction between two or a few people to clarify what you are learning that is important for everyone involved in the process of school renewal (e.g., "I'm hearing that we are really concerned about the ways we connect with parents. If we're really serious about youth development, it seems like we might need to pay attention to this. Is this something we would like to ask the staff to talk about together?").
- **Have patience.** While conflict is necessary and healthy to our growth and development as a school community, the issues that come up are complex and not easily resolved. It is important to be committed to long-term struggles and to continuously hold and revisit the topic in order to reach long-term solutions. Even if a conversation doesn't go exactly as planned and perhaps turns into an argument instead of a healthy discussion, you may want to give it some space until you are both ready to come back to the discussion again. If a conversation becomes heated or personal and listening is no longer happening, you might also consider asking a third party to act as a neutral mediator or facilitator of the discussion.

SO, HOW DO WE START THESE CONVERSATIONS?

These conversations require courage and can be difficult to begin. Successful conversations tend to occur when we have taken a step back to pause and center ourselves so that we can engage from a neutral, non-judgmental, curious place, rather than a place of emotion. It helps tremendously to truly assume good intentions in the other person and to think about how to communicate concerns in a way that others can hear it. You can find templates and processes for preparing for difficult conversations in numerous books, such as educational coach Jennifer Abrams 2009 book Having Hard Conversations. We've slightly adapted Abrams' format for a difficult conversation as it relates to issues of youth development:

- **Set the tone:** Convey authentic respect for the other person, the sincere belief that the other person cares about and wants what is best for all students and may not be aware of how their behavior or actions may not be aligned with the school vision or what we know is most effective for students (e.g., "I know this is a challenging time, we are all under pressure and sometimes act from a place of frustration. I also can tell by the way you talk about your students in the lunch room that you really care about them and want them to be successful, so I'm sure you'd never want to do or say anything to them that might harm them.").
- **State the issue:** State the issue clearly, concisely and without judgment, using professional language and citing a specific school agreement, principle, etc. that has not been followed (e.g., "Your students need to be treated with respect and support, as we stated in our school values.").
- **Give specific examples:** Give one or two specific, vivid examples that illustrate the behavior of concern (e.g., "I overheard you yelling at several of your students when they did not know the answer to a question.")
- **Describe the impact of this behavior on others:** Assume that your colleague is not aware of the consequences or social implication of their behavior on others and share this information without judgment (e.g., "What I remember from the research article we read and the workshop we attended is that students tend to be motivated when it is safe to fail and they can learn from their mistakes. When you yelled at your students, they felt humiliated and like you were saying they were stupid. This can actually de-motivate students who may stop trying, if they believe they are not capable.").
- **Offer support and indicate a wish to dialogue:** Just as our students need support in changing their behavior, so do adults. Offer specific support you can offer to help your colleague and invite their thoughts/input (e.g., "I'm happy to talk through other strategies you could try, if that would be helpful to you. Does this make sense? What are your thoughts?").

You might practice in a safe place like with a trusted colleague or with your Learning Action Community (LAC). You could bring up a concern you had about something that was said by that colleague or in that group or you could practice how you might start a conversation with someone outside the group. Even if time has passed, you might still approach someone and ask them if you could talk to them about something the person said or did that you wanted to understand better. While challenging, this core issue lies at the heart of building a school community that models and collaboratively builds a supportive, nurturing environment for our young people.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center**, http://www.pcrcweb.org/ provides resources and support on conflict resolution and prevention for youth and adults.
- **National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation**, at http://www.thataway.org, serves as a hub for dialogue (and deliberation) for facilitators, conveners, and trainers and houses thousands of resources on these communication methodologies.
- **6 Seconds: The Emotional Intelligence Network**, http://www.6seconds.org/ has numerous resources, readings, and tools regarding dialogue and collaboration for youth and adults and for creating positive change.
- ***The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*** by Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman is a very helpful guide for school change leaders and facilitators on developing collaborative norms, conducing productive conversations, using conflict as a resource and developing collaborative groups as part of school change efforts.
- ***The Essential Conversation*** by Sarah-Lawrence Lightfoot is a helpful resource on teacher/parent conversations.
- **Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) Curriculum** http://jgc.stanford.edu/resources/yell_curriculum.html includes tools, protocols, and other resources for running effective meetings with youth.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

- *Making Meetings Work: How to Get Started, Get Going and Get it Done* by Ann M. Delehant.
- Chapter 5 "Conducting Successful Meetings" and Chapter 7 "Designing Time-Efficient and Effective Meetings" from *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* by Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman

ADDENDUM FOR FACILITATORS OF PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

HOW DO WE CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND FACILITATE THESE KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS?

An environment of safety is necessary for having productive talks with both youth and adults that result in increased understanding. A safe environment is one in which all perspectives are truly heard and valued, participants feel they can take risks to be honest about issues pertaining directly to the school's shared vision, and the goal is a common understanding that gets us closer to that vision.

Facilitation (whether done by a formal facilitator, a team leader, or even a team member) can help create a safe environment for these kinds of conversations. The following are techniques that can help to maintain a safe environment for productive conversations:

- **Listen to all voices.** All group members need to feel heard, so providing space for everyone to give input, provide their view point, and feel heard is important. Facilitators can slow down a conversation and help participants to hear each other by paraphrasing what they heard, charting what participants contribute, or noticing when someone might look puzzled, upset, or isn't contributing and asking for their perspective. Acknowledging feelings can also help a member feel heard. For example, you might say, "I'm hearing that you are frustrated with this change, because you feel that you will have to give something else up to accommodate it. Is that right?"
- **Ask the group.** When a group member gives a perspective that differs from the current direction of the group, after providing space for that idea to be heard and paraphrasing what you heard, ask the rest of the group to share their feelings on that new idea. Do others agree? Have others had the same experience? What new assumptions have been introduced? What evidence would help us test those assumptions? How does the group want to proceed with that new perspective? This allows space for others who share this sentiment to be heard, or for the person who raised the issue to hear a different viewpoint held by others. It also reinforces group decision-making.
- **Seek win-wins.** If space is kept open for members to collectively and collaboratively decide new strategies, even seemingly contradictory viewpoints can find common ground. Facilitators can reframe different viewpoints to help move toward consensus. For example, "I heard some people say that grouping students by lower achieving versus high achieving can facilitate teachers' ability to directly address and teach to students' needs. But I also heard some of you say that we have to pay attention to the perils of 'tracking' and that all students need to receive equally rigorous instruction. Are these two points mutually exclusive, or can we work to find a way to address both these needs and realities?" Once again, this could keep the focus on unity and collective decisions, as opposed to debate and mutually exclusive ideas.
- **Check in on how change is affecting group members.** Even if the conversation is about a decision that participants cannot change, it can help members to accept the change if they feel heard and supported. Be clear about where the decision came from, how and why it was made and what aspects of implementation of the decision participants do have input into. Ask participants about the benefits they see from the change as well as the concerns they have, and ask them if there is additional information, support or resources that they need to help implement the decision. The goal of listening is to help group members come to common understanding, not necessarily common agreement.
- **Continue the conversation.** Because these ideas are complex, resolution is not likely to be reached in a single conversation. As facilitators, you will likely need to end a conversation before resolution. It can be helpful to point out the importance of starting the conversation and beginning to share ideas but that because of the complexity of the issue you need to bring the conversation to a close. However, it is important to let participants know that you will help them revisit the issue again in future to continue the conversation.

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