
NORMS OF COLLABORATION

It is said that Jonas Salk of polio vaccine fame was once in conversation with Gregory Bateson—an anthropologist, psychologist, and a pioneer in systems thinking. "Where does thinking occur?" asked Salk. After a moment of reflection, Bateson pointed to the space between them and said, "I think it occurs right here."

What collaboration is and is not. Collaboration means working together to solve problems, invent, create, build models, and produce results. Why is collaboration important? When people collaborate they learn more, work harder, support one another, and commit to cumulative efforts and effects.

Just as swimming is more than waving one's arms in the water, collaboration is not achieved just by working in groups. These activities qualify as collaboration only when they produce results. For this to happen, players must see each other as having different resources (information, cognitive styles, cultures, decision making authority, etc.) but know that they come together as equals to do a job.

Like any new skill or behavior that has to be learned, these seven norms require practice and conscious attention. Individuals using them for the first time may find the exercise awkward until the seven norms become more automatic behaviors.

1. **Pause**

Pausing actually slows down the "to and fro" of discussion. There are fewer 'frames per second' to deal with. It provides for the precious "wait time" which has been shown in classrooms to dramatically improve student critical thinking. Pausing and the acceptance of moments of silence creates a relaxed and yet purposeful atmosphere. Silence, however initially uncomfortable, can be an excellent indicator of productive collaboration. Pausing also signals to others that their ideas and comments are worth thinking about. It dignifies their contribution and implicitly encourages future participation. Pausing enhances discussion and greatly increases the quality of decision making.

2. **Paraphrase**

To paraphrase is to re-cast or translate into one's own words, to summarize or to provide an example of what has just been said. The paraphrase maintains the intention and the accurate meaning of what has just been said while using different words and phrases. The paraphrase helps members of a team hear and understand each other as they evaluate data and formulate decisions. Paraphrasing is also extremely effective when reducing group tension and individual anger. "The paraphrase is possibly the most powerful of all non-judgmental verbal responses because it communicates that 'I am attempting to understand you'" (Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 49).

3. **Probe for specificity**

Ask for clarification to vague nouns and pronouns (they), action words (improve), comparators (best), rule words (shouldn't), and universal quantifiers (everyone).

4. **Put ideas on the table**

When individuals own ideas, other group members tend to interact with the speaker out of their feeling for and relationship to the speaker rather than with the ideas presented. To have an idea be received in the spirit in which you tell it, label your intentions, "This is one idea..." or "Here is a thought." Pull idea off the table when you believe it is blocking the progress.

5. **Pay attention to self and others**

Collaborative work is facilitated when each team member is explicitly conscious of self and others – not only aware of what he or she is saying, but also how it is said and how others are responding to it. "Understanding how we create different perceptions allows us to accept others' points of view as simply different, not necessarily wrong. We come to understand that

we should be curious about other people's impressions and understandings – not judgmental. The more we understand about how someone else processes information, the better we can communicate with them (Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 59)."

6. Presume positive intentions

Of all the seven norms of collaboration, this one may be the most fundamental, for without it, the rest are meaningless. Simply put, this is the assumption that other members of the team are acting from positive and constructive intentions (however much we may disagree with their ideas). Presuming positive presuppositions is not a passive state but needs to become a regular manifestation of one's verbal responses. The assumption of positive intentions permits the creation of such sophisticated concepts as a "loyal opposition" and it allows one member of a group to play "the devil's advocate." It builds trust, promotes healthy cognitive disagreement and reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and affective/emotional conflict.

7. Pursue a balance between advocacy and inquiry

Both inquiry and advocacy are necessary components of collaborative work. Highly effective teams are aware of this and self-consciously attempt to balance them. Inquiry provides for greater understanding. Advocacy leads to decision making. One of the common mistakes that collaborative teams may make is to bring premature closure to problem identification (inquiry for understanding) and rush into problem resolution (advocacy for a specific remedy or solution). Maintaining a balance between advocating for a position and inquiring about the positions held by others further inculcates the ethos of a genuine learning community.

Some traits of good collaborators:

- good listener
- on topic
- respectful
- honest
- trusting
- open-minded
- engaged
- able to see different perspectives
- flexible
- strong problem solver
- sense of humor
- not defensive
- comfortable with eye contact
- aware of body language
- self-reflective
- positive
- willing to let go and move on
- able to share responsibility
- able to recognize needs of individual and the group
- sees positive potential in others
- able to accept feedback
- validating