

Norms of Collaboration¹

Probing for Specificity

In this information age, our brains have been programmed to draw rapid conclusions and make decisions quickly. While this may be natural, it can make clear communication difficult. There are five categories in particular that we need to probe for specifics: vague nouns and pronouns, vague action words, comparators, rule words and universal qualifiers. Probing allows members to ask for specifics that will provide us with a clear understanding of what the speaker is saying.



Presuming Positive Intent

Of all the norms, this norm is the foundation for the use of all other norms. This norm asks us to assume that each and every member's intentions are meant to be positive and constructive – even if we don't agree with them. This is not always an easy norm to follow. It requires active vigilance and monitoring of our verbal and nonverbal responses. This norm is the basis for establishing a climate of trust where cognitive dissonance can be a positively experienced and promote learning for all.

Paying Attention to Self & Others

Effective collaboration is advanced when group members are aware of themselves and others as group members – in what is said or not said, how much or little time, in how other do or don't respond. This norm also includes being aware of non-verbal signals – facial expressions, gestures and eye contact. "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 (can) be curious about other people's impressions and understandings – not judgmental. (Costa & Garmston, 1994)."

Promoting a Spirit of Inquiry

This norm works in tandem with its counterpart, advocacy, but to different ends. Advocacy, in general, leads to decision-making, which inquiry, leads to greater understanding and dialogue. Too often groups find that they are rushing to advocate a solution before they have thoroughly examined the problem and its causes. Keeping a healthy balance between the two can lead to a culture of collaboration and learning where everyone is the beneficiary.

Pausing

This norm is based on "wait time" research showing that a pause of 3-5 seconds substantially improves critical thinking. Although initially it can be awkward, it is a valuable indicator of effective collaboration. Pausing signals that the ideas of others are important and worth consideration. There are four kinds of pauses: 1) after a question is asked, 2) after someone speaks, 3) when the speaker asks for a pause to collect their ideas, and 4) when the whole group asks for to pause for a couple of minutes.

Putting Ideas on the Table

This norm encourages all of us, even the "faint of heart" to share their thinking with the group. Ideas fuel both dialogue and discussion. It is vital that everyone participate. As in the spirit of inquiry, putting ideas on the table has its own counterpart. There may be times when an idea needs to be taken "off the table," because it is impeding group progress and may not be critical. So, as a member of the group may say, "Here is an idea I have been considering," he/she may also say, "You know, I think this idea is confusing the issue right now. I would like to withdraw it so we can proceed."

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is to attempt to capture someone's meaning and intent in one's own words. It is one of the most valuable and least used communication tools in meetings. A paraphrase can be used effectively with a question. First paraphrase, then ask a question. Paraphrasing aligns the parties and creates a safe environment for thinking. "The paraphrase is possibly the most powerful of all non-judgmental verbal responses because it communicates that 'I am attempting to understand you' and that says 'I value you' (Costa & Garmston, 1994)."

¹ Adapted from the work of Robert Garmston, Bruce Wellman and Peter Senge by The GroupWorks, LLC. 2008©