

## SEVEN NORMS OF COLLABORATIVE WORK

**Pausing:** 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 to dramatically improve 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.

**Paraphrasing:** 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' and that says 'I value you' (Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 49)."

**Probing for specificity:** Probing seeks to clarify something which is not yet fully understood. More information may be required or a term may need to be more fully defined. Clarifying questions can be either specific or open-ended, depending upon the circumstances. Gentle probes increase the clarity and precision of a group's thinking and contribute to trust building because they communicate to group members that their ideas are worthy of exploration and consideration.

**Putting forward ideas:** It takes a degree of self-confidence and courage to put forward an idea and it is vital that collaborative groups nurture such self-confidence and courage. Ideas are the heart of a meaningful discussion. Groups must be comfortable to process information by analyzing, comparing, predicting, applying or drawing causal relationships.

**Paying 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)."

**Presuming 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.

**Pursuing 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.

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.

## **LEARNING THE SKILLS OF COLLABORATION**

Bob Garmston, co-author of [The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups](#), is fond of reminding us that any group that is too busy to practice the skills of collaboration is also a group that is too busy to improve. Ironically, the groups that are most in need of the skills of collaboration are often those most resistant to them. Groups functioning most effectively are the same ones which recognize the need for regular collaboration training; those in trouble are very often the ones which are too busy to examine how they are working together or how they are failing to work together.

One excellent way of developing the skills of collaboration that we have used at the International School of Tanganyika is a Round Robin Reflection Activity (Garmston & Wellman, 1997). We have found that the activity works best when groups are relatively small, no larger than seven or eight, and that a time limit is set, say 20 to 30 minutes. It is also more effective on the second or third time it is used, as participants become more comfortable with the process of reflection. At first, the paraphrasing may seem forced and artificial and even tedious. However, the more it is used, the greater the likelihood that it will become part of one's unconscious repertoire of collaborative strategies.