MEETINGS THAT MATTER: CONVERSATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS

BY RAYMOND D. JORGENSEN

I f the element in greatest evidence in a school system is "young people," and the second most prevalent feature is "desks," surely a close third would have to be "meetings." From classroom teacher to parent leader to principal to superintendent, every individual within a school system attends a significant number of meetings. On average, adult educational professionals spend 25 percent of their time in meetings of one kind or another. Principals are likely to spend up to 40 percent of their time around a conference table. The superintendent or district administrator takes the prize, likely spending 80 percent of her or his time in structured conversation with others.

Is that a good thing? Well, it depends on the quality of the meeting. Educational professionals concur that most of the time they spend in "meeting mode" could be better used otherwise. Are we to conclude, then, that meetings should be abolished? On the contrary, an understanding of systems and learning suggests that meetings can and should be powerful vehicles of positive change, leading participants to common understanding that results in authentic engagement and alignment.

TEAM TIP

Whether you're in a school system or business, use the guidelines in this article to ensure that every meeting you facilitate advances the organization's overall vision and mission.

A Systems Perspective

The fault is not in the meeting form itself but in our approach to meetings. According to Fred Kofman and Peter Senge (in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, edited by Sarita Chawla and John Renesch, Productivity Press, 1995), "the main dysfunctions in today's organizations are actually by-products of their past success." As a culture, we

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have become accustomed to going to meetings that are rarely interesting, much less opportunities for learning and community development. Nevertheless, those poorly constructed gatherings have managed to move us forward as schools. Any hint of doing away with or dramatically changing them is often perceived as heresy, heard as "that's not the way we do things here."

The solution? Looking at the school district from a systems perspective. In a systems worldview, as we move from the primacy of the pieces to the primacy of the whole, each meeting provides an opportunity for participants to develop a collective understanding of their connectedness and interdependence. As people evolve from focusing on self to focusing on self as a member of a larger commu-

nity, the purpose of meetings shifts from solving problems to creating, from defending absolute truths of the moment to achieving coherent and collective interpretations of what they want their school to be.

Gone are the gripe sessions, the meetings that take place simply because it is the appointed time for the appointed group to convene, and the gatherings that subtly pull a subsystem (department, grade level, staff sector) off the track of established vision and mission. Participants no longer come to the table with the traditional burning questions: *How is my job to be redefined today?* or *How can I use this meeting to get what I want within the system?* Instead, every meeting within the entire school district centers on aligning people's efforts to help achieve the system's vision and mission.

This new meeting paradigm enables leaders to steward the system rather than control it. Instead of poking around in unfolding educational and administrative processes, the facilitator clarifies and aligns the action of the group. Time is redirected from typical "administrivia" and ritual actions to the development of shared meaning, as each participant experiences personal learning through conversation. This shift enables meeting leaders to "identify problems that can best be addressed through collective action and then involve others in finding solutions" (Liebman and Friedrich, "Teachers, Writers, Leaders" in *Educational Leadership*, 65(1) September 2007). The leader of such a meeting is now a community agent helping to align his or her group with the system's goals and facilitating the design of methods for achieving those goals.

A FOCUS on Conversational Leadership

To make this shift, in school systems across the country, district and school-level leaders regularly engage people in results-oriented, focused meetings based on a communication model called "conversational leadership," a phrase to my knowledge coined by Carolyn Baldwin, an elementary principal from Winter Haven, Florida. Conversational leadership (CL) uses multiple learning tools to develop a common understanding and aligned action in an organization. The philosophical foundations of this approach lie in Malcolm Knowles's adult learning models, the total quality work of W. Edwards Deming, Peter Senge's learning organizations, Edward Schein's ideas of process consulting, leadership philosopher Robert K. Greenleaf's servant-leadership, and effective communication theory.

Using the conversational leadership model, the designer and steward of each meeting is responsible for helping to achieve the organization's desired outcomes through learning. The successful meeting, then, will have as its particular outcome some type of personal or team structural change—i.e., a change in thinking, acting, or interacting. As this change occurs, the group becomes realigned with the system's goals, identifying and committing to methods it can adopt to help achieve those goals. As each and every meeting is focused on supporting the success of the system as a whole, the meeting leader—whether teacher, principal, PTO president, or curriculum supervisor—crafts and stewards the meeting in alignment with the system's mission and goals.

Each meeting begins with ground rules, which can be posted and referenced as needed. We recommend FOCUS (each of these items is defined and explained below):
F: Follow the learning conversation guidelines (see "Five Guidelines for Learning Conversations")
O: Open with Check-in and CPO (Context, Purpose, Outcome)
C: Clarify each agenda item with CPO
U: Use Closing-the-Learning-Loop protocols
S: Support safe space

Begin with a simple check-in procedure, inviting each participant to make a short statement that bridges the gap from their previous task/experience to the one at hand, ending with "I'm in." Once participants have been reminded of the ground rules and have centered themselves, the leader provides a quick but essential overview to put the meeting in the *context* of the larger picture: How does today's meeting fit into our larger, ongoing efforts and vision? He or she then states the *purpose* of the meeting (which should never be "because it's the day of the month we always meet") and tells participants exactly what *outcome* they can expect.

Context: How this meeting/agenda item fits into the overall mission/vision
Purpose: What common understanding or shared meaning we intend to develop
Outcome: What we will each know or be able to do when the meeting concludes

Some examples of context might be:
• *An incident involving student rights has occurred that needs our attention.*
• *We are three months out from our 10-year accreditation filing deadline.*
• *The Board has requested our input on a matter of policy at its next meeting.*

Using those three examples, a purpose statement might be:
• *I want to share the details of the incident and build consensus for a response.*
• *Today we'll look at our timeline and make course corrections.*
• *I want your opinions on this matter to help me make a recommendation that represents your interests.*

Finally, with those purposes in mind, the outcome might be stated in one of these three ways:
• *At the close of this meeting, each of us will know the Board's position and how we can support it.*
• *By the end of the meeting, we'll have identified a handful of target areas and the steps we'll take, collectively and individually,*

FIVE GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

These guidelines (originally developed by Sue Miller-Hurst) are really disciplines to practice, not unlike healthy eating or exercise. They are not learned instantly nor are they transferred immediately to the meeting participants. However, each individual committed to improved meeting outcomes can begin to practice these skills and encourage their growth in self and others. A good place to start would be with the leader.

• Listen for Understanding
Listen openly, without judgment or blame, receiving what others say from a place of learning rather than from a place of knowing or confirming your own position. Listen with equal respect for each person present, hoping to understand rather than to "fix," argue, refute, or persuade. At the same time, listen quietly to yourself as others speak.

• Speak from the Heart
When sincerely moved to make a contribution, speak honestly from your own experience. Speak into the stream of developing common understanding, not just to fill silence or to have your position heard.

• Suspend Judgment
Hold at bay your certainties and assumptions. Suspend any need to be right or have the correct answer. In fact, try to suspend any certainty that you, yourself, are right.

• Hold Space for Differences
Embrace different points of view as learning opportunities. Don't counter with "but." Instead, contribute with "and." Remain open to outcomes that may not be your outcomes. Encourage contributions from those who have remained silent.

• Slow Down the Inquiry
Provide silent time to digest what has just been said. Allow further conversation to flow naturally, develop, and deepen.

to bring them up to speed.

• *I hope to have a rough draft of my recommendation, with your help, before we adjourn.*

Once the CPO is clear, the leader can engage the participants through conversational learning techniques, clarifying for understanding as needed. Some organizations devote numerous meetings and retreats to truly mastering the concept of "learning conversation." The leader's efforts to confirm for common understanding are critical in developing shared meaning that leads to purposeful action. She does so by closing the learning loop—inviting participants to share their understanding about the information presented thus far. And, through it all, the facilitator must work to create a safe space, a team setting that promotes forthright sharing and discussion because participants feel comfortable and trusting.

Groups often apply three steps of this four-step process over and over throughout the meeting, bringing each topic of interest through the stages of learning conversation, clarity, and confirmation. When all business has been concluded, it is important to invite participants to assess the meeting's effectiveness for the purpose of improving on the process at the next meeting. Such a protocol, in partnership with a new understanding and appreciation of the meeting as a valid way for a system to learn and grow, can turn your gatherings into meetings that matter.

One Voice

Once all the leaders at all levels within the system are able and willing to use conversational leadership to facilitate meetings that move the system toward its goals, the system begins to speak with one voice. That does not preclude disagreement. Vigorous disagreement among leaders using learning protocols does not damage effective communication. Conversely, disagreement allows for learning and enhances understanding, which leads to shared meaning. Sincere disagreement should not be construed as disloyalty or as a threat to the system's unity. Difference of opinion marks an opportunity to deepen understanding, enhance the quality of working relationships, and accomplish

alignment. Disciplined meeting conversation is one of the answers: "If we cannot talk together, we cannot work together" (William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together,* Doubleday, 1999).

Through conversational leadership, participants are gradually able to recognize the interdependence of the varying subsystems and appreciate the value of constructive interaction with others. The steady stream of documents for approval disappears from the regular agenda as the "approval" syndrome becomes inconsistent with proper delegation. Everyone does his or her own work instead of pretending that endlessly supervising the day-to-day action of others is a meaningful contribution.

Meetings no longer aim at managing individuals or incessantly redefining operational details. The executive team learns that what it previously thought was "monitoring" was merely wandering around in the presence of data. Meetings no longer focus on complaints. Problems are expected to be resolved locally; if not, the issue is viewed as symptomatic of a system flaw. All players get to "have their say," but they maintain the priority of the school's performance outcomes and common mission.

More meetings are spent learning diverse points of view regarding the heart of the school's responsibility—supporting and nurturing the student body by projecting future needs and garnering wisdom for long-term decision making about performance results and structures. On a daily basis, teachers learn from one another through conversation with their peers; this becomes the predominant meeting structure. Gone is the preoccupation with what schools do in favor of clearly defining what schools are *for*. Finally, leadership becomes visionary, focusing on the shared dreams of the community, because it is no longer forged in a flurry of trivia, micromanagement, and administrative detail.

Successful meetings in schools and school systems, at all levels and for all purposes, can become significantly more effective and productive if they follow a carefully tested protocol. A

good meeting is highly structured in its core processes, but fluid in nature, welcoming and encouraging participation. Ironically, the more carefully structured the meeting, the easier it is to invite dialogue and allow meaningful conversations to take their course. Following the format outlined above, meetings will achieve clear communication and common understanding—something vitally important in today's educational institutions. ◘

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For Additional Reading

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