

Defining the Team's Work

The first professional learning team meeting should focus on defining the team's work and determining the processes the team will use to accomplish this work. Use your introductory session to help team members establish ground rules and identify personal and team goals.

Establishing Ground Rules

Ground Rules are the preventions you put into place before the group starts the meeting set the stage for an effective session. Ground rules help create an environment that ensures that everyone is on the same page about how they want to work together, how they want to be treated and what is expected of them. Teams often think that they can skip this particular tool, but as time goes by and teams begin to struggle to work together and/or stay on task, they discover that if they had ground rules it would be a lot easier to hold themselves and each other accountable for behaviors that are conducive to completing the work and moving forward to reaching team and individual goals.

Effective ground rules are only effective if they match the team's needs. Typically, learning teams need ground rules to govern:

- § Attendance
- § How teams will navigate discussions,
- § Expectations for how members will prepare for each meeting,
- § How team members will interact,
- § How teams will manage time,
- § How teams will assess their progress.

One way to establish ground rules is to develop a preliminary list of rules to suggest to the group ahead of time. This can be especially helpful if time is an issue. After you have shared your list, be sure to inquire whether the ground rules are agreeable and mention that if you had more time together, you would have preferred the group to generate the list.

A second way to create ground rules is to list those rules you commonly use, and then ask for additional ground rules from the participants. If someone proposes a ground rule, ask the other participants if they agree to it. If most do, add it to the list.

The best way to create ground rules, if you have the time, is to allow the participants to generate the entire list. Ask them to think about what they, as individuals, need to ensure a safe environment to allow for some risk-taking. If the participants are having difficulty coming up with ground rules, or if they do not come up with a particular ground rule you feel is important to the success of your facilitation, feel free to add it to the list yourself.

Learning teams are made up of individuals. As such, it is important that Ground Rules work for everyone involved. It is everyone's responsibility to "maintain" the rules during meetings. Thus, it is important to determine how you will address each other when your team is not upholding their ground rules." Each person equally shares the responsibility for upholding the Ground Rules AND ensuring that others uphold them as well.

You may not need to review all the Ground Rules each time – as long as they are posted or distributed for all to see. You can include them on the agenda each time as well. Sometimes you just need to point out 1-2 Ground Rules that will be important for the success of that day's meeting. For example, "our agenda is quite full today – we really need to honor the time limits for each item, use our time- keeper to support us and stay on task".

Notes Box: Ground rules should be designed to keep the meeting moving, encourage participation and allow for the group to meet its goals. Posting the ground rules is important, but it's equally important to identify the ones that are working and the ones that aren't as you begin each meeting. You can ask participants to be especially conscious of only one of the ground rules if the non-adherence to a particular ground rule is creating a barrier to the group's efforts. If a particular ground rule is routinely broken, bounce it back to the participants. A fruitful discussion can often arise from a close examination of why the participants are not adhering to particular items.

Suggestions for starter ground rules:

- Respect others when they are talking.
- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing. Use "I" instead of "they," "we," and "you."
- Respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks. Focus on ideas.
- Be conscious of body language and nonverbal responses – they can be as disrespectful as words.
- Respect start time, end time, time limits, and deadlines.
- Honor time limits.
- Participate actively.
- Be open to new ideas.
- Listen to learn.
- Use silent mode on mobile phone.

- Maintain confidentiality.

Keep in mind that ground rules will naturally evolve as the team works together. You will need to revisit these ground rules periodically to accommodate what you and your team members have learned about behaviors and procedures that facilitate better learning and those that get in the way of learning together. Add, delete, and revise ground rules as needed.

Roles

An important job for the facilitator prior to the team learning session is to assign **ROLES**. By identifying who is doing what before, during and after the meeting can eliminate the “I thought you were doing that...” syndrome! It also eliminates the feeling of isolation and of being overwhelmed with too many tasks on top of your teaching responsibilities. Luckily, you will only have to really think about two or three roles for the process of each meeting. One of the roles belongs to you!

Facilitator

You are the **facilitator**. Along with keeping things moving in the meeting, it is also your responsibility to set agendas, reserve space for the meetings and take care of other logistics. This includes setting up meeting times and platforms, making handouts or charts and sending reminder emails/notes before each session. You will be creating agendas following a prescribed format that informs your participants of the upcoming goals and objectives for the next session. It is also your responsibility to monitor how well the ground rules are being upheld.

Recorder

The second role that might be useful is to assign a **recorder**. It's often helpful to have someone assigned to the role of recorder, whether it is to take notes about actions decided on by the group or just someone to help you chart if the group needs or wants a record of ideas. You can choose a new recorder at each session or assign the role at the first meeting to a volunteer. A recorder does NOT take notes about the team's discussion. The discussion should be considered private to allow for honest and open dialogue. However, if you want a record of actions you want to take, who will take them, or just to record homework a recorder comes in handy. The recorder commits to distribute any documents to all team members after each meeting.

Notes Box: You don't have to do everything yourself! Make sure you ask for assistance from your team in sharing roles. Ultimately, facilitation is your role but often a shared role creates a positive experience for all of your team members. You may want to share the logistics with a "logistics coordinator" or pair up with another member of your team to adjust activities on the agenda that fit your specific needs.

Timekeeper

The third role that helps the process move along and is a great prevention to have in place is a **timekeeper**. This team member can help you as the facilitator to keep moving in order to meet your objectives in a timely way to the satisfaction of your learning team, which is your goal. Time can be negotiated along the way, but in order to have an effective meeting a timekeeper can be a lifesaver!

Meeting Tools

Effective Agenda

An effective agenda communicates important information such as: the topics for discussion, time allotment for each topic and the processes used to get the learning team to their goals. When you send an email reminder prior to a session it is always a good idea to send the agenda along with it. The structure of the agenda will remain consistent, but your processes, content or times may need adjustment.

Icebreakers/ Team-Builders

You may choose to use icebreakers/team-builders at the beginning of each session so that your participants get to know each other a little better. Keep in mind that icebreakers/team-builders help with congeniality, not necessarily collegiality. In other words, they can help everyone enjoy working together but will not ensure that everyone works together effectively. However, icebreakers and team-builders can be quite effective to set the tone for your meeting.

Notes Box:

Just a little reminder: Icebreakers/Team-builders are extremely important to help people get to know each other on a personal level but they can also eat into the time you are learning content and discussing practices. As the facilitator it is up to you to determine if your group needs some “get to know you better” time at the beginning of your sessions. It may be the “thing” you need to accomplish your objectives. Other times, if your team is already established and works well together already, you may be able to skip the icebreakers and team-builders and move right to the “meat” of the session.

Recycle Bin

A tool that is invaluable to a facilitator or leader of any meeting or professional learning community is the use of a **recycle bin**. A graphic representation of a bin on a poster should be drawn on a large poster to hang in your meeting location at EVERY meeting. The purpose of the recycle bin is to capture any questions participants have that need a response, clarification or answer. The questions could be about the processes used during an activity, logistical questions or general questions about student learning. If participants have a question, write it down. They should wait until the end of the session to post them, just in case their question is answered during your meeting. That way, you are not stopping whenever an idea pops into someone’s head, but allowing them to process their question, listen for a possible response to their question from all the expertise in their learning team and then determining whether or not they still need to post the question.

Note: The recycle symbol is one that assures participants that whatever goes in the bin will be recycled back. It is a way to make sure that everyone feels heard. If you do not come back to the questions on the bin, your participants could possibly get stuck and not be able to move on. Be sure to come back to the questions generated on the bin regularly, whether it is at the beginning of each session, the end of a session or an “add-on session” because your participants need it!

Quick Check: Quick Checks help you and your team members keep your meetings as productive as possible by helping everyone assess how well each meeting went and make adjustments for the next meeting. After each meeting take a minute to consider whether team members followed some basic ground rules. These check-in questions can be individual reflections or answered on an index card and handed in anonymously for the facilitator to analyze and report the data at the next meeting.

1. Did all team members come to the meeting on time?
2. Did everyone come prepared?
3. Were all team members respectful of others when they were talking?
4. Did everyone get a chance to participate?
5. Did everyone actively participate?
6. Were there distractions that kept us from meeting our objectives?

Another set of questions that can help you begin to revise those roadblocks to getting the work done is the following:

1. What ground rules are we observing pretty well?
2. What ground rules seem to get ignored frequently?
3. What behaviors are team members using now that seem to be useful and helpful to the group?
4. What behaviors make you uncomfortable or unable to focus during the learning team sessions?
5. Based on the answers we gave to these questions, what are your recommendations for changes, additions or deletions to our stated ground rules?

Remember, as the facilitator, you will decide which questions to ask based on your observations during the meetings. These questions will help you and your team to revise or adjust ground rules based on the group's needs. Don't forget to record these adjustments and post them as well as include them on the subsequent agenda.

Team Goal

As a team you should set a goal or goals for your time together. What do you want to accomplish as a team? Setting a team goal will help you focus your work as a team.

Learning teams require commitment and belief that the time they spend together is worth it. So developing concrete, targeted, measurable goals become more crucial to maintaining the energy it will take to get there.

Your team goal should be tied in some way to the school's goals or focus areas for the year. If the school is working toward raising reading scores, then your team goal should focus on how the team will use their work together to support the school's goal for raising reading scores. How will setting students up for success impact that goal? Take time as a team to discuss the school-wide focus and then sharpen that focus to account for the work that the team will be doing together during this process. Try to agree upon one goal that will guide your work together as a team.

Each team should write the goal in sufficient detail to provide the team members with a clear focus throughout the year and make the goal transparent to those outside the team. You can use the following focus questions to help teams identify goal areas.

Sample focus questions

- § At the end of our work together, how will we teach differently?
- § At the end of our work together, what will be the impact on student achievement?
- § How will setting students up for success through acceleration affect our students' achievement?
- § How will setting students up for success through acceleration impact the number of struggling students we currently have in our grade level, subject, team, or school?
- § What will this work together do to help us as a department, grade level, or team to achieve school-wide goals or address school-wide areas of focus?

Use the answers to these focus questions to identify areas of need and desired outcomes. Then state these desired outcomes as goals or purpose statements. Make sure that:

- The goal is clear
- The goal is important to everyone:
- The goal focuses on instruction
- The goal is based on a clear need in the school
- The goal centers on teacher learning that results in student achievement
- The goal is challenging

- The goal is doable
- The goal is measurable

Note: Part of setting goals is to plan for monitoring along the way. To know if you are working in alignment with your goal, you should determine benchmarks for measurement whether or not what you are learning and practicing is making a difference for students. Keep it simple, but make sure you check in with your team periodically to see if you are all on the same road headed in the same direction.

My Team Goal

Directions: What is your team's instructional goal? What do you as a team hope to accomplish as a result of your work together? Discuss with your team how you will monitor the goal along the way, what are some possible benchmarks you will use (peer visits with reflection, examining student work, pre-assessments/summative assessments, etc.).

School Vision:		
School Mission:		
School Core Values:		
Team Goal:		
Milestones: What activities will we undertake to work toward our goal?	Evidence. How will we know that we are achieving our goal?	By When? When will we accomplish each milestone?
