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Having Productive Discussions 101

Cultivating Individual Skills

INTRODUCTION

Discussions are both the backbone and lifeblood of professional learning communities. They are the single most powerful means by which educators can shape effective teaching and learning programs for students and themselves. Yet a quick inquiry to almost any educator (or other professional for that matter) will reveal that *most formal staff discussions produce paltry results.*

Why is that? Our experience shows that too often staff discussions are monotonic, one-way presentations of information based on an agenda set only by the person in charge. There is generally little ownership of the topics by participants. Those to whom the information is relevant discuss and rediscuss it, while those on whom it will have little or no effect tune out and wait patiently for the meeting to end. Staff discussions conducted in this manner are at best necessary but unproductive rituals and at worst distractions from the real challenges that educators face.

Productive discussions, in contrast, display lively group intelligence, stimulate within the group a big-picture view of its work, and spur all to inquire whether the track being pursued best serves the needs of the group and its constituents. They also encourage consistent levels of mutual support and accountability, invite frequent reviews of progress toward agreed-upon goals, and reinforce the need for synthesis, drawing on the

best that all voices offer in service of the group's greater cause. As important, dynamic discussions foster constructive dissent—that is, the genuine give-and-take necessary for differing opinions to be heard and evaluated, and for the best course of action—not just the first or least problematic—to be pursued.

Conducting productive discussions, however, is far from easy. It requires emotional balance, understanding, analysis, reflection, and most of all, practice. Part of the difficulty of improving the quality of discussions is that they are too often seen as common and routine dimensions of work. In fact, to most people, discussing issues is simply part of their natural endowment as human beings. Conversations take place all the time. We all know how to add our two cents' worth, so, what's the problem?

We maintain that the problem is largely one of time, understanding, and effort. Educators are constantly bombarded with internal and external demands, as well as a relentlessly changing landscape within which to do their work. The amount of time they have outside the classroom to talk about how to address challenges is limited, the topics they grapple with are increasingly complex, and the energy available to devote to new or different initiatives is minimal. Therefore, when school staff come together to solve a problem, they can ill afford to have unproductive discussions where the agenda is only partially relevant, all voices are not raised or heard, decisions are not reached (or worse, they are continually revisited), and the larger purpose of the group is unclear.

Instead, the time that educators spend together must be focused, the topics relevant, the decisions clear, and the results—what will happen or change because of the decisions taken—understood and shared. We assert that if discussions can be made productive, they will ultimately save time and imbue school staff with the energy they need to carry out decisions rather than wasting time and leaving participants feeling unsatisfied.

One way of viewing productive discussions is to see them as akin to designing and making quilts. To produce a beautiful and seamless product, quilters need both knowledge of the overall effort and an understanding of the unique role that each person plays. In addition, they must recognize that while there may be a convener—that is, the person who first identified the need for a new quilt—all quilters have a responsibility for making both individual and collective contributions, to not only select the fabric and prepare their own block but also help merge various blocks into a cohesive design. Thus, in productive discussions, as in quilt making, the whole becomes more powerful than the sum of the parts. Discussions are better when there is a common purpose and pattern, individual contributions are expected and valued, and leadership is shared.

Discussion participants, like quilters, also need to see themselves not as masters of their craft but as apprentices working continuously to refine and improve their art. If it is true that quilters are made and not born, it is also true that good discussion participants are not naturally skilled but must practice and hone their abilities over time.

In this chapter, our goal is to promote a deeper understanding of the multiple facets of effective discussions and illustrate the critical role they play in building and shaping professional learning communities. We invite readers to analyze and reflect on these facets, as well as the specific and concrete ways we suggest to practice and perfect the art of conducting productive discussions.

TEN PILLARS OF PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSION

For discussions to be truly productive, participants must perform 10 functions individually and together. In the *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* by Peter Senge and his colleagues (1994), the functions are referred to as elements of “skillful discussion.” David Bohm (1996) explored similar concepts but with a more theoretical bent in *On Dialogue*. For our part, we have dubbed the discussion functions “pillars” because they support, or raise the level of, communication for all participants in professional learning communities.

1. *Advocate*—Make your voice heard not to exclude other voices but to enrich the discussion and stimulate your colleagues’ thinking by sharing your unique perspective. The assumption is that all discussants can make substantive contributions if allowed the airtime to do so. *Balance is the key here; put your two cents in but not two dollars. Make your views known when necessary but hold back on occasion to give others the opportunity to insert theirs. Be able to look back at the end of the discussion and say to yourself, “I did advance point A, D, and F, but I held back on B, C, and E.”*
2. *Listen*—Focus not only on what your colleagues are saying but also on what they are not saying (that is, actively listen for meaning and for underlying assumptions.) *Concentration here is key. If you say to yourself, “I must work at understanding what she is saying, but I must also discern what she is leaving out,” then you increase your chances of active listening. In addition, it helps if you consciously suppress preparing your next comment.*
3. *Inquire*—Inquire as well as advocate. Frequently, ask colleagues what they mean or intend instead of just inserting or countering

with your own views. *In the discussion, replace a point you would like to make with a question to a colleague about a point he or she just made. Be able to look back at the end of the discussion and see that you have asked your colleagues questions as often as you have inserted your own views. Be sure to ask authentic questions, though, not rhetorical ones (i.e., position statements with a question mark at the end).*

4. *Reflect*—Train yourself to think on two levels: first, what can I do to foster a common cause, and second, why are we doing or discussing this? How does it relate to our larger purpose? *This is a tough assignment but an essential building block of productive discussions. While listening hard to what others are saying, you have to be not only a contributor to the specific topic but also a critic of the discussion as a not only whole. You must continually think about and ask, “How will the track we are on get us the result we want?” This is like bringing post-discussion reflections into the discussion while it is taking place.*
5. *Affirm*—Disagree as needed but spend an equal amount of time building on colleagues’ points of view. *This adds to the balancing act already under way. To be effective, you need to constantly balance dissent with affirmation. Spend an equal or greater amount of time focusing on what you agree with and are willing to do than on what you disagree with and are unwilling to do. When your colleagues say something you agree with, acknowledge that and build on it to move the discussion toward a positive end. Think of dissent as akin to raising your voice with students. If you do it all the time, it becomes ineffective. On the other hand, if you agree more than you disagree, people will really listen when you need to voice concern.*

While performing all of the above discussion functions as an individual participant, you also need to step back occasionally and serve other, more collective functions relating to the flow and conclusion of the discussion. These last five pillars, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2, are as necessary as the first five. As you mull them over, understand that they are meant to be the province of all discussants, not just discussion leaders. In other words, anyone in the room should be able to carry them out. The success of any given discussion depends on someone picking up the slack even if the person in charge or fellow discussants do not.

6. *Synthesize*—Acknowledge and foster an emerging consensus of opinion even if it is partial or fragile. *Timing is critical here. As you contribute in various ways to the discussion—advocating, listening, questioning, reflecting, and affirming—also keenly observe the flow of*

the discussion. When the time feels right, suggest that there seems to be an area of agreement worth memorializing and seek the concurrence of your colleagues. No move in discussions has more leadership power than this one because you are molding others' individual views into a group position.

7. *Decide*—Frame decision points, push for decisions when the time appears ripe, be explicit that a decision has been taken, and hold yourself and your colleagues to it. *Decisions are natural outgrowths of areas of agreement; therefore, when you see agreement, call for a decision. Formulate the decision point openly, ask for concurrence, and, when it appears to be taking hold, nail it down (that is, be explicit and commit it to writing on a flip chart or whiteboard for later incorporation into meeting notes). The most important aspect of making good decisions is getting everyone to commit to them in the room. Discourage water-cooler second-guessing by seeking support from each person before they leave.*
8. *Act*—Live by the maxim that boldness has genius in it. While deciding requires thoughtful deliberation, action goes a step further by bringing decisions to life, giving them substance and meaning. It is easy to talk about what needs to be done, but it requires boldness and commitment to step up and do it. *Integral to many decisions are actions, or specified tasks, that Person X—or a group led by Person X—needs to complete by a certain time. (It is usually best for one person to have primary responsibility, very rarely two or more.) Clarity requires hashing out the what, who, and when and recording these details publicly during the discussion and in post-meeting notes.*
9. *Communicate*—Before leaving any discussion, always ask, “Who needs to know what we just decided or did?” *Having come this far in the process, the culminating move is outreach. No staff or group operates in a vacuum; thus, before closing a discussion, determine (1) who needs to know about what was done, (2) how those people will get the information, and (3) how they can provide feedback. Communicating is an essential adjunct of acting.*
10. *Assess*—Suggest simple ways to determine if decisions and actions are having the desired effect. *Effective action involves not only doing something by a specific date or time but also assessing progress along the way and determining if the action is leading to the desired outcome (i.e., What will be different now that we have accomplished this task or goal—is it what we hoped to achieve?). So, like communicating, assessing is an adjunct to acting. Groups must explicitly*

outline an objective approach for evaluating their progress and actions. It is best if the approach is simple because if it is too complex, convoluted, or burdensome, it will not be used.

INTERPRETING THE PILLARS

It would be helpful if the 10 pillars could be turned into a memorable acronym, like *CASHWORTH*, which is used by rock climbers to remember their moves. It stands for Concentrate, Always Test Holds, Stand Upright, Hands Low, Watch Your Feet, On Three Points, Rhythm, Think, and Heels Low. Unfortunately, *ALIRA-SDACA* is not at all memorable (unless you recall Neil Sedaka, a singer and songwriter from the sixties and seventies).

It might also be helpful if there were fewer than 10 pillars. No doubt, some readers are thinking, “If I have to do 10 things just to have a productive discussion, I’d prefer to have unproductive ones.” But upon reflection, you will notice that among the 10 pillars, there is a progression from functions for which individual discussion participants have responsibility, such as “advocate” and “listen,” to those that require more group responsibility, such as “decide” and “communicate.” Thinking about the 10 pillars in two sets—one for individuals and one for the group—may make them easier to embrace and remember.

That said, it is important for readers to understand that having multiple discussion functions is intentional. There is much to do to create the colorful and engaging quilt of a productive discussion. Participants must be able to differentiate between issues that require in-depth discussion and those that do not, seek the counsel of their peers, affirm the contributions of those working with them, and work collectively to design and compose a coordinated product. In addition, they must call on diverse skills, from using good judgment about the worthiness of content and posing critical questions, to having the sensitivity to offer colleagues positive reinforcement while at the same time challenging them to decide, act, and be accountable for their actions.

That the functions move from individual responsibilities to collective ones is also intentional. Like a quilting bee, a productive discussion moves from uncoordinated individual offerings to a carefully orchestrated group consensus. Moving from “my” position to “our” position can be tricky, but if all participants insert their voices openly with commensurate questioning of positions and affirmation when possible, there is a much greater chance that a collective view will emerge. Stepping back and reaching for the larger, more objective picture and shaping it as the discussion unfolds also increases the likelihood of reaching a shared position.

Improving the quality of discussions, however, is not always easy or comfortable. When implementing the pillars, participants need to exercise both self-consciousness and restraint, which is rare in most discussions, particularly those where the stakes are high. In most instances, discussants get so wrapped up in and committed to their own views that they become like islands separated by large bodies of water rather than adjoining countries composing a single continent.

Unfortunately, when emotions run high, composure and perspective are often lost, and the discussion becomes a melee, sometimes relatively constrained, other times uncontrolled and chaotic. It is not that productive discussions must be emotionless affairs conducted by robotlike beings, but there must be room for a certain amount of objectivity and balance. Participants have to be able to think during the discussion about what to do as well as when and how to do it. They cannot merely plunge ahead driven by the force of the emotion behind their own perspective.

On a philosophical plane, readers might conclude—quite rightly—that with all participants sharing responsibility for making the quilt of a productive discussion, leadership for achieving the outcome is distributed to all. Indeed, these discussion functions beckon democratic participation at its highest and most intense level. Whether such an approach is appropriate for *all* school decisions and deliberations is a separate topic, but there is no question that a shared approach is integral to building a true professional learning community.

Therefore, what we are advocating here is the use of a specialized method for engaging staff in discussions on matters where there is a need for not only universal involvement but also for universal buy-in and concerted action. Ripe examples include schoolwide approaches to teaching and learning and matters of student discipline. On such issues, it is unlikely that an approach imposed from the top down will be implemented in lock-step by the corps of professionals who do the work at the ground level. Thus, what is needed is an avenue for those professionals to come together, to discuss and decide in concert, to agree to act in common, to communicate their intent to constituents, and to assess their progress and impact.

INITIAL SELF-ASSESSMENT

More likely than not, you and your colleagues are thinking that implementing the 10 pillars may well result in more rewarding and productive discussions but are probably reluctant to embrace them quite yet. You may be wondering if they are just another fad in education that will quickly

pass or a gimmick designed to sell books rather than effective tools that will have real value inside and outside the classroom. We argue that absent productive discussions, professional learning communities cannot reach their full potential, but ultimately, it is up to you to decide whether they warrant an investment of your time.

Before making that decision, it may be helpful to administer a self-assessment to see how well your group—however you choose to define it—conducts discussions now. How often do you have conversations where all or almost all of those present apply the 10 pillars to a sufficient extent? Does the group combine the individual threads contained in the first five pillars into a fabric that allows the last five to take hold?

To conduct a self-assessment, start by reviewing the survey below. Either ask one group member to excerpt and duplicate it as is or create your own modified test. Then, complete the following steps:

- Distribute the survey to all members of the group, give them a deadline for completing it, and ask one member to collect the individual responses. Explain the importance of answering the questions with brutal honesty (this is no time to be polite). Also, give group members a way of returning their survey responses anonymously so they can be honest without fear of reprisal.
- Ask one member of the group to synthesize the responses.
- Recruit another member—perhaps one who has already demonstrated solid discussion citizenship—to analyze and present the results. Make sure this person does not have formal authority within the organization (like a principal or department head) because, as already noted, productive discussions require a level playing field in which authority is muted if not suppressed. By corollary it is a good idea to distribute leadership for the assessment within the group from the very beginning, as this is a desired outcome for a true professional learning community.
- Beyond preparing a quantitative summary, the member who does the analysis should also present, in writing, initial interpretations of the results and questions the staff will address in a scheduled debrief of the self-assessment.

After the results of the self-assessment are presented, use the following questions to spark discussion about what the results mean for your group:

- According to the data, what are our greatest discussion strengths?
- What are our greatest discussion challenges?
- Do we do better on the individual functions or the group functions, or is it a mixed bag?

SELF-ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Instructions

For each discussion pillar, indicate how well your group currently performs that function, by circling a number between 1 ("not well at all") and 5 ("very well"). When formulating your responses, remember that "how well" includes the frequency with which members perform the function (not often, occasionally, most of the time, all the time) and how universally the function is applied by all members of the group (not just one or two). Also, be sure to respond to the open-ended question posed at the end of the survey.

Pillar

I. Advocate	1	2	3	4	5
II. Listen	1	2	3	4	5
III. Inquire	1	2	3	4	5
IV. Reflect	1	2	3	4	5
V. Affirm	1	2	3	4	5
VI. Synthesize	1	2	3	4	5
VII. Decide	1	2	3	4	5
VIII. Act	1	2	3	4	5
IX. Communicate	1	2	3	4	5
X. Assess	1	2	3	4	5

Open-Ended Question

What is the one thing you would most like to see changed about how the group currently discusses and resolves big issues? And if this change were made, how would it affect your work as educators? (Addressing this more qualitative question will deter the group from prematurely concluding that you do not have to bother with the 10 pillars because you are already using them.)

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- Do the data reveal any surprises (good or bad) about how the group views the quality of its discussions?
- Are there any clues in the data as to why we are/are not reaching our full potential?
- What, in summary, are the things members would like to see changed?
- How do members see these changes affecting our work as educators?

PRACTICE EXERCISES 1–3

With the results of the self-assessment in hand, the group will have a better sense of where it stands in terms of its ability to conduct productive discussions. Then, in light of its identified strengths and weaknesses, the group can embark upon the series of exercises, described below, to hone individual skills.

For each exercise, the group will need to choose a topic of concern and consequence in the realm of schoolwide approaches to teaching and learning or student discipline. Such topics should be of equal concern to all—teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff—to increase the chances of creating a level playing field. Each exercise should take no more than an hour, so it should be possible to conduct one at any given staff meeting.

Exercise 1

Advocating, Listening, and Affirming

Rationale Our assumption is that participants are most familiar with advocacy as a discussion function, since we tend to be quite skilled at presenting our own positions. In the case of listening and affirming, however, familiarity might be a stretch as there is relatively little of either in most discussions we have observed.

For the most part, participants listen only superficially or intermittently. Instead, they concentrate on the conflicts raging inside their own heads about what is being said or are so intent on preparing their next statement that they are unable to concentrate on and evaluate someone else's contributions.

Similarly, with regard to affirming, it is fair to say that we are naturally inclined toward the value and wisdom of our own ideas and opinions rather than someone else's, yet in a productive discussion, there is considerable value added when one person honors the contribution of another by affirming and building on it. As a result, this exercise—which is designed to help discussants become as skilled at listening and affirming as they are at advocating—is likely to present a worthy challenge.

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Preparation Prior to the discussion, count the number of participants in the group. Divide the group into three by letting each person draw a slip of paper with either the number 1, 2, or 3 on it. It would probably make sense if there were more ones than twos and threes as ones will be speakers, twos builders, and threes intent listeners and summarizers. Apprise the people in each group of their responsibilities as described below.

Exercise For 20 minutes, the group engages in a discussion about an important issue. Those who drew ones assert their positions on the chosen topic in the time available, and those who drew twos build upon what one or more of the speakers have said. The operant word here is *build*, which means to affirm the gist of another's contribution and add to it. It does not mean artfully changing the subject in such a way as to reflect one's own position or saying, "I agree, but . . ." Those who drew threes remain silent throughout the discussion and listen intently to what is being said, focusing all their mental energy on

- the gist of what is being said;
- what a few of the underlying assumptions might be behind what is being said; and
- the potential educational implications of the points made.

After 15 minutes have passed, the listeners (threes) take the last five minutes to summarize the gist of the overall discussion (thus testifying to the power of listening as integral to discussion leadership).

Debrief A 15-minute debriefing after the discussion adds to the impact of the exercise. It should focus on the following questions:

- What new perspectives were gained by organizing the discussion this way?
- To what extent did the exercise effect more active listening not only by the listeners but by all?
- To what extent did intense listening (as opposed to advocating) help with the accuracy and thoroughness of the discussion summary?
- How well did the affirmers understand and build on others' stated positions?
- Was it possible to see how affirming comments might be the building blocks of positions shared by several people in the room?
- To what extent was the discussion a productive one? Was it more or less productive than previous discussions the group has had?

Exercise 2

Advocacy, Inquiry, and Reflection

Rationale Like its predecessor, this exercise mixes what comes naturally (advocacy) with what might seem, at first, to be artificial (inquiry and reflection). Asking a fellow participant what he or she means by a particular point or how he or she might implement a certain idea is not a frequent occurrence in most discussions, yet stepping forward to inquire is a positive move for participants, particularly when trying to sort through complex issues and make important decisions.

The same is true of reflection. Only if members can serve as critics of the discussion, as well as participants in it, will the conversation flow as it should and yield desired results. Thus, it is imperative that professional learning communities practice these two less natural functions until they become a normal and comfortable part of discourse.

Preparation This time, use playing cards to determine roles. Have those who are dealt nonface cards be speakers, those who are dealt face cards be questioners, and those who are dealt Aces be conversation critics. (You will need to prepare the deck in advance depending on the number of people present. Ideally, you will want more cards for speakers, fewer for questioners, and the fewest for conversation critics.) Also, select one person—perhaps the oldest or youngest member of the group—to summarize the discussion. Apprise people of their responsibilities as described below.

Exercise The challenge to the group this time is to engage in a 25-minute discussion that combines advocacy, inquiry, and reflection. Each time a speaker (nonface card) asserts a position about the selected topic during the limited time, a questioner (face card) asks a question to advance group understanding. For example, questioners could ask the following:

- What do you mean by that? Can you elaborate?
- What is your view based on?
- How might we do what you are suggesting?
- What impact might your proposal have on students?
- Do you believe other staff members will join you in this undertaking?

After 15 minutes, the group discussion ceases, and for the next 10 minutes, the conversation critics (Aces) critique the quality and

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usefulness of the discussion as a whole. The comments should be as constructive as possible yet critical. They should, at a minimum, address the following questions:

- Were there points raised that deserve further examination by the group?
- How good a discussion was it in terms of confronting the important matters before us?
- To what extent did members seem to be listening to others' points of view?
- To what extent did members build on others' comments?
- Were there significant detours in the discussion from its main flow? And if so, how effective were we in getting back on track?

At the end, the member of the group identified to summarize the discussion recaps what was said.

Debrief

After the discussion, a 15-minute debriefing takes place, exploring the following questions:

- What was it like to balance advocacy with inquiry?
- To what extent did this balancing act illuminate some members' positions and thus enrich the discussion?
- How well did we do as "loving" critics of the discussion and as "cheerful" recipients of the criticism?
- To what extent was the guidance offered useful?
- What could we have done as discussion participants to improve our performance as critics and recipients of criticism?
- Taken as a whole, was the discussion richer than most we have had?
- Even if the exercise felt artificial, to what extent did it also feel useful?

Exercise 3

Combining the First Five Functions

Rationale Space must be made for the group to practice the skills honed in the previous exercises. Like a mini-comprehensive exam, this final exercise provides that space.

Preparation This exercise uses a short case study, called an Outcome Narrative (ON), to focus the discussion. Prior to the meeting when the exercise will be conducted, distribute the narrative (which follows) to all participants, ask them to read it, and have them come prepared to discuss it as if it were a problem your group was currently facing.

Exercise

An ON is a case study, but it differs from others readers may have encountered in two important ways. To begin with, it is much shorter. It also is more directive than the traditional case study, which leaves determination of outcomes to the reader. Its main components are a description of a problematic situation or dilemma, key actors with associated roles and responsibilities in resolving the problem, desired outcomes, and an explanation of how the situation is typically handled.

In this book, ONs provide a platform that readers can use to cut through the complexities involved in shaping their own professional learning community. In Chapter 5, readers will learn more about the narratives, including their rationale as a development tool, how to construct them, and ways to deploy them in support of becoming a full-fledged professional learning community and sustaining its work over time.

As a group, your challenge is to read the ON carefully and discuss it together, focusing on the questions listed at the end. During your discussion, practice the skills you have been honing in previous practice sessions—listen hard to what your colleagues are saying, ask them questions when you think it will add substance, affirm others' points of view and build on them to encourage consensus, reflect on the overall quality and value of the discussion as it is taking place and afterward (Will it get you to where you want to go?), and voice your concern if you feel the group is off track.



Exemplary Outcome Narrative: Is Meeting Classroom Objectives Enough?

Situation

Michael has worked for Coyne Secondary School for more than 15 years. In every one of those years, he has met or exceeded agreed-upon educational objectives, some of which have been a considerable stretch for him. In his early years, Michael was seen as an up-and-coming star and received solid raises and other forms of recognition. He was even named once as a finalist for District Teacher of the Year.

During his tenure at Coyne, Michael worked with three principals. All three rated his performance as “meeting” or “exceeding” expectations. Yet over the last four years, both his superiors and his colleagues have come to view him as uncooperative and noncommunicative—both with his school colleagues and with members of the broader community. This comes at a time when, because of budget constraints, the school staff has

had to work together more closely to set common priorities and carry out joint efforts. Yet Michael continues to meet his classroom objectives; in fact, last year was one of his more successful years. Despite increasing concerns about his ability to function as an effective member of the school community, his position and his performance rating remain unchanged.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Principal—must add a component to the evaluation process that addresses teachers' abilities to work effectively and cooperatively with each other to achieve common school goals. This reinforces the notion that teachers are responsible not only for what happens in their own classrooms but also for what happens in the school as a whole. Contributing to solutions, working as a team member, fostering an environment of respect and cooperation—all of these must be evaluated if they are part of the school's values and leadership principles (formally or informally). They can be implemented in a 360-degree format, where input for the evaluation is provided not only by the school principal but also by one's colleagues.

Once such an evaluation component is created, the principal can use it to evaluate Michael's overall performance (as well that of others) to see if he is meeting school objectives as well as classroom objectives. After the 360-degree review, the principal should have a frank discussion with Michael about the results. If he fails to measure up, Michael should be rated as "needs improvement" and an accompanying plan developed to help him address the documented deficiencies. If problems persist, more severe action should be taken in cooperation with district leaders.

District Leaders (including human resource managers)—have to set the standard in the organization for how to balance values and leadership principles with educational objectives and determine appropriate steps to take when balance is not achieved. If district and school leaders reward the fulfilment of educational objectives in spite of major shortfalls on broader responsibilities, other professionals will follow suit.

Desired Outcome

District and school leaders should regularly address performance issues with those they supervise directly:

- *Values and leadership principles should be closely monitored when a pattern of poor performance has been established, and the pattern should be documented.*
- *District leaders should be consulted to discuss appropriate remedial steps, including application of a "supervised development plan."*
- *In the event that performance problems cannot be successfully resolved, the teacher's supervisor, with human resources' staff, should take the appropriate personnel action.*

What Typically Occurs

More often than not, a professional who meets his or her educational objectives but fails to fulfill citizenship objectives is not appropriately dealt with. Rather, he or she is left alone and given a "meets" or even an "exceeds" rating while continuing to cause problems in the social fabric of the school and beyond. This inevitably depresses the productivity of the school and causes the entire district's efforts to suffer.

Debriefing Questions for Interpreting the Outcome Narrative

(Conduct a group discussion to analyze the narrative and test its applicability to your situation.)

- 1. What problem or problems are presented in the narrative?*
- 2. If there is more than one problem, differentiate among them. Which are more important, which can be addressed relatively easily, which require more thoughtful treatment?*
- 3. Is the list of main actors comprehensive, or are there others you think may play consequential roles? If so, who are they?*
- 4. To what extent are the roles and responsibilities of the main actors well presented? Are there gaps that should be filled?*
- 5. To what extent do you agree with the desired outcome?*
- 6. How close is the description of how the situation is typically handled to the way it is handled in your work context?*
- 7. What are your recommendations here with regard to how the situation could have been better handled?*

Questions on Discussion Quality

(Now engage in a searching debriefing of how well the discussion went.)

- 1. How well did we do in terms of using the discussion tools we have been sharpening?*
- 2. To what extent did we make linkages with our own situation?*
- 3. Did individual members balance advocacy with listening, inquiring, and affirming even after the problem became ours?*
- 4. Was there earnest reflection, where a colleague or two reflected on the quality or appropriateness of the discussion flow?*



CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we introduced and explained the purpose and application of essential discussion functions, the 10 pillars. These functions are the elemental stock-in-trade of professionals wanting to create a true learning community. Simply stated, they provide the foundational tools necessary for educators to engage with each other in more productive ways. They are the vaunted “fishing skills” that enable learning community members to “feed themselves” so they can move on to the more demanding work of meeting students’ needs.

Readers also were (1) encouraged to assess the quality of their current discussions and (2) given several opportunities to perfect their own discussion skills through carefully orchestrated exercises involving the first five pillars—advocating, listening, affirming, inquiring, and reflecting. When these pillars—which represent what individual members must bring to the professional discussion table—are combined with the five pillars discussed in Chapter 2, professional learning communities will have the solid base necessary to conduct the hard but rewarding work of defining their unique identity, embarking upon culture change and positive action, and advancing their own learning as a well-integrated professional staff ready to continuously improve its own performance.