



Norms of Collaboration: Tools for productive communication between group members

Pausing

Pausing is based on “wait time” research indicating higher-level thinking takes three to five seconds and the time changes quality of thinking. Four kinds of pausing allow this processing. The first is after a question is asked. The second is after someone speaks. A third type is under the control of the speaker. “Give me a moment and I will answer.” The fourth type of pause is a collective pause formally structured by the group. Some pauses are decided by the group and some initiated individually.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is one of the most valuable and least used communication tools in meetings. A paraphrase can be used effectively with a question. First paraphrase, and then ask a question. Practice this skill and notice what happens to the dynamics of the conversation. Paraphrasing aligns the parties and create a safe environment for thinking. Levels of paraphrasing may include any of the following: clarify speaker statement; summarize what was said; or shifting what was said to include an overarching purpose.

Putting Ideas on the Table

Ideas are the heart of group work. In order to be effective, they must be released to the group. “Here is an idea for consideration,” or “I am putting this idea on the table.” It is equally important to know when to remove an idea from the table. Use signal words such as “I think this idea is blocking our thinking and I want to remove it from the table.” When ideas are “owned” by individuals, other group members’ responses tend to reflect their feelings toward the speaker, and may not be specific to the ideas presented.

Paying Attention to Self and Others

Meaningful dialogue and discussion is facilitated when each group member is conscious of oneself and others. This consciousness includes being aware of your own and others posture, gesture, and other non-verbals. Paying attention to self and others could include the amount of talking, the amount of silence, or responding to others’ information delivery or language style.

Presuming Positive Intent

Assuming that others’ intentions are positive encourages honest conversations about important matters. Positive presuppositions reduce the possibility of the listener perceiving threats and challenges in a paraphrase or question. Group members can signal this by saying: “Presuming positive intent, I’m thinking that...”



Our emotional processors are sensitive to signals for positive intentions, and can engage our higher-level thinking and openness to new ideas as a result.

No one knows everything, together we know a lot

In any conversation, especially ones about systemic power (be it race, class, gender, etc.), we know that each person is coming to the conversation with different levels of lived experience and embodied expertise. We also believe that each person has something to contribute to the conversation. This agreement asks that we all practice being humble, and look for what we have to learn from each person in the room. It also means we all have a responsibility to share what we know, as well as our questions, so that others may learn from us.

Acknowledge the difference between intent and impact

We have noticed that overwhelmingly, when someone does or says something that causes harm, or supports the values of systemic power, it is not their intention to do so. We also have seen that a person denying the harm they have caused because they were well intended often causes more harm. The ask is that we each do the work to acknowledge that our intent and the impact of our actions are two different things, and to take responsibility for any negative impact we have. (This can be as simple as apologizing.)

Probing for Specificity

Human brains are not always designed for specificity. We often form quick generalizations from fragments of information. These quick judgments based on assumptions can cause difficulties in communication. Five areas contributing to overuse of generalizations are vague nouns and pronouns, vague action words and comparators, rule words and universal quantifiers. Probing action asks members to remove the generalization and cite the exact data.

Pursuing a Balance Between Advocacy and Inquiry

Try to spend equal amounts of time and energy advocating for one's own ideas and inquiring into the ideas of others. Creating a balance of advocacy and inquiry requires both emotional and cognitive resources. This balance is most necessary at the exact point when many group members are least likely to want to inquire into the ideas of others. It is at the moment of greatest disagreement that this norm makes the biggest difference for productive communication.