

Facilitating Productive Data Conversations

Posted In: Instructional Leadership

By Tom Many, EdD, Tesha Ferriby Thomas, EdD, and Susan K. Sparks

When asked, “What prevents your team from working well together?” we often hear stories of negative data conversations and issues with poor facilitation. These stories are disheartening and unnecessary because we can do better. – Sparks

If you think back to the most successful teams you have been a part of, you will realize effective facilitation played a major role in the team’s success. A team leader, a coach or an administrator probably followed a purposeful agenda, elicited balanced participation, and intervened when the group energy was low, the team was off task or a norm was violated.

The most successful schools make use of facilitation to support teams that might otherwise struggle. This is an important distinction because we believe it is the process of facilitation, not simply the presence of a facilitator, that makes the difference. Furthermore, we believe there are people within every school—teacher leaders, coaches and principals—who can guide teams through productive data conversations if they attend to four fundamentals of facilitation.

Set the Tone: Effective Facilitation Establishes Norms

Effective facilitation sets the tone for productive data conversations. Talking about results regularly uncovers vulnerabilities and weaknesses in instructional practice. To hold constructive and honest conversations about their professional practice, teachers need to feel safe, so it is important to set norms that address trust and safety. Effective facilitation also emphasizes norms that are pertinent to the task at hand. For example, a team might commit to suspending judgment or assuming positive intentions when discussing the results of common assessments. Norms reflect our values and shape the way team members interact with each other so when reviewing or bringing new norms into team meetings, effective facilitation is intentional about describing why norms are beneficial.

Design for Success: Effective Facilitation is Mindful of Process

When planning for a data conversation, effective facilitation identifies the right processes to help teams achieve the desired outcomes. For example, the conscious, purposeful, and deliberate use of appropriate protocols for looking at student work or the results of a common assessment helps promote effective and efficient data conversations. The goal of facilitating data conversations is “to develop teachers’ capacities to use data to inform decision making, to act on their decisions, and to use data as evidence in their work” (Killion & Harrison, 2017, p. 41). Effective facilitation selects appropriate processes and/or protocols that ensure each person contributes and helps the team positively impact student learning.

Provide Structure: Effective Facilitation Provides Context

To promote productive data conversations, effective facilitation promotes the use of structures. For example, using a PDSA cycle helps data conversations stay focused on results, helps teachers avoid becoming side-tracked by unproductive lines of inquiry, and encourages teams to identify the next best steps that will improve student learning. When teams are working to understand the implications that data has on teaching and learning, another simple yet powerful structure is the Third Point strategy introduced by Michael Grinder (1997). This strategy combines the data from the entire team into a single, shared document in order to shift the conversation from individual teachers focused on “my students” to teams of teachers focused on “our students.” Attending to how our students performed promotes a sense of shared responsibility and cooperation among team members.

Focus Conversations: Effective Facilitation Promotes Communication

Collaboration requires listening to one another with a commitment to understand. The most effective facilitation is intentional about how teachers debate, dialogue, and deliberate about data. The right kind of facilitation encourages data conversations that are focused on the right work and discussed in the right way. Lipton and Wellman (2012) believe, “When working with data, how groups talk is as important as what they talk about” (p. 80) [emphasis added]. In order to ensure data conversations are productive, good facilitation pays particular attention to several important verbal and nonverbal skills.

- **Listening Without Judgment Builds Understanding**

Sometimes teachers feel anxious about data conversations because they worry they will be

judged. Others may be threatened because they view student performance as a reflection of their own self-worth. To help teachers move past these feelings of vulnerability, the best facilitation promotes listening to learn while withholding judgment. The practice of listening to learn builds understanding, develops empathy, and strengthens relationships.

- **Pausing Creates Space for Reflection**

Pausing during data conversation allows participants to slow down, reflect, and think critically.

Pausing also creates time to process new information, be creative, and generate potential solutions. “Experienced and aware groups and experienced and aware facilitators come to realize that complex thinking takes and requires time” (Wellman & Lipton, 2004, p. 21). Periodically pausing the conversation creates the time and space teams need for the kind of reflection that promotes learning and creativity.

- **Paraphrasing Promotes Learning and Understanding from Others**

Paraphrasing is a powerful tool for enhancing communication. When done well, paraphrasing helps the team remember what was said, moves the conversation along, and alleviates miscommunication or assumptions. Paraphrasing also demonstrates that we are seeking to understand and learn from one another, helps summarize main points, communicates respect, and shifts a team’s thinking to higher conceptual levels.

- **Inquiry Supports Thinking and Learning**

Open-ended questions promote inquiry. Wellman and Lipton (2004) offer examples of open-ended questions that might be asked in a data conversation such as, “As you interpret these test scores, what are some of the things you are noticing?” Or, “Compare the results to the goals for your students, what are some possible factors that influence these outcomes?” (p. 32). Open-ended questions promote inquiry, support elaboration and reflection, and

generate ideas that broaden perspectives. In addition, by using words such as some, might, notice, and seems, effective facilitation elicits detail which lead to deeper understanding and serves to expand rather than limit the participants' thinking. For example, the team might be asked, "What are some things that surprise you? What are some possible options we might consider? Are there other perspectives we might be missing?"

Effective facilitation anticipates and responds to challenges. It is expected, and accepted, that barriers to effective collaboration will pop up and require skillful and strategic facilitation to move the team forward. By being proactive and deliberate in planning data conversations, good facilitation prevents teams from becoming sidetracked by disputes and dysfunction.

"A facilitator helps the team free itself from internal obstacles or difficulties so members more efficiently and effectively accomplish their goals." – J. Killion

When teams convene to review samples of student work or analyze data from common assessments they are participating in one of the most essential discussions associated with the PLC process. To get the most out of these crucial data conversations, principals, coaches, and teacher leaders intentionally use effective facilitation (structure, process, and expertise) to proactively navigate unexpected challenges and barriers.

Facilitating data conversations can be a tricky business that requires intentionality, purposeful planning, and lots of practice. When facilitation sets the tone, designs for success, provides structure, and focuses conversations on the right work, teams are far more likely to have the kind of data conversations that result in improved student learning.

[Dr. Tom Many](#) is an author and consultant. His career in education spans more than 30 years.

[Dr. Tesha Ferriby Thomas](#) has spent the past 25 years as a teacher, administrator and consultant. She is co-author of "Amplify Your Impact" and "How Schools Thrive," and is a Solution Tree associate.

[Susan K. Sparks](#) is an educational consultant who helps teams and districts develop more successful schools through facilitation, training and coaching.

References

Grinder, M. (1997). The science of nonverbal communication. Battleground, WA: Michael Grinder and Associates.

Killion, J. (2013). School-based professional learning for implementing the common core: Unit 2 facilitating learning teams. Oxford, Ohio: Learning Forward.

Killion, J. & Harrison, C. (2017). Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches (2nd Ed.). Oxford, Ohio: Learning Forward.

Lipton, L. & Wellman, B. (2012). Got data? Now what? Creating and leading cultures of inquiry. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Many, T., Maffoni, M., Sparks, S. & Thomas, T. (2018). Amplify your impact: Coaching collaborative teams in a PLC at Work. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Sparks, S. & Many, T. (2015). How to Cultivate Collaboration in a PLC. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Wellman, B. & Lipton, L., (2004). Data driven dialogue: A facilitator's guide to collaborative inquiry. Sherman, CT: Mira Via.

TEPSA News, August 2021, Vol 78, No 4

Copyright © 2021 by the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association. No part of articles in TEPSA publications or on the website may be reproduced in any medium without the [permission](#) of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association.

Link: [Facilitating Productive Data Conversations – TEPSA](#)