

GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

FOSTERING SOCIAL SENSITIVITY— SENSORY ACUITY, CONVERSATIONAL EQUITY, AND COMMON NORMS



Three areas of social sensitivity are most productive for teams desiring high productivity. They are sensory sensibility, **conversational equity**, and certain social norms. To explore social sensitivity in greater depth and relate it to your work, it may be useful to read, reflect, and talk with your team or team members about the following information.

Sensory Acuity

The following vignettes demonstrate acuity in communications that leads to correctly inferring other's feelings, thoughts, and intentions.

"What does that look mean?" asks a team member, seeing a flicker of change on a person's face. The question evokes a perspective from the person not previously expressed.

Another member seems excited about an option brought to the table. *"What are you liking about this?"* the facilitator asks. She then turns to another participant where she has noticed a frown and inquires, *"Do you have a concern we haven't talked about?"* Another team member asks, *"These are two conflicting viewpoints. Can we take a minute of silence to think about what this means?"* The team silently reflects. In each case social sensitivity has led to more inclusive and effective group thinking.

Conversational Equity The importance of equity in talking time and turn taking has appeared in several research studies. In one, researchers Woolley and others (2010) studied people in teams as they made decisions and solved complex problems. Woolley rated the most successful teams as having the highest collective team intelligence. They found three factors that influenced what they called a high team IQ:

- 1) The more turn taking within the team, the better the team performance.
- 2) The greater the social sensitivity of group members, the higher the team IQ
- 3) The more women in the group, the higher the team IQ.

As reported in the *Harvard Business Review*, this study was replicated twice, and Woolley and her colleagues found that intellectual intelligence made no difference in team behavior, but they did find significant differences between genders for social sensitivity. As Woolley explains it, this reminds us that is important to have people of both genders who score high on social sensitivity measures (Woolley & Malone, 2011). In our work, we have found that teaching others about the cues of sensitivity makes a difference for both genders.

Common Norms

Successful teams agree on common norms. Some teams adopt a set of norms, reflect on them, learn, and practice the skills of each, and make them their own. A version of these norms, developed

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by colleagues Bill Baker and Stan Shalit, was introduced as a way to extend Cognitive Coaching strategies to group work. Named the “Seven Norms of Collaboration,” Garmston and Wellman (2016) further refined and memorialized this work as part of the Adaptive Schools strategies. The norms are as follows: pausing, paraphrasing, posing questions, providing data, placing ideas on the table, paying attention to self and others, and presuming positive intentions. (Norms can be explicit or unconsciously used.) This family of norms has a life of its own on the internet, appearing in many places, including the United States Department of State website. Posting, of course, is different from using.

Four Formidable Norms: Four norms in particular contribute to understanding. The norms are pausing, paraphrasing, posing questions, and presuming positive intentions. Of these, the paraphrase appears to be the most important verbal skill for social sensitivity, interpersonal trust, and safety in learning.

1. **Pausing:** Thinking takes time. It takes from three to five seconds for most human brains to process higher-order thoughts. Garmston and Wellman (2016, p. 43) described a group “in which if you stopped to breathe while speaking, you lost the floor.” What they recognized was that without a norm of pausing, meetings became a competition for air space. They soon learned to monitor pauses at several junctures to increase their productivity and satisfaction.
2. **Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing requires intensively focused listening. It communicates “I want to understand you.” Attempting to understand other people communicates that they are valued and what they say is important. A paraphrase is also a factor in rapport. Paraphrasing aligns the parties and creates a safe environment for thinking.

Paraphrasing an emotion reduces the intensity of the feeling. “*You are annoyed,*” “*That’s really frustrating for you,*” or “*When that happens, it makes you angry.*” Putting feelings into words makes the feelings less intense. Naming feelings activates a different part of the brain involved with inhibiting behavior and processing emotions. To paraphrase is to accept the person’s reality, thereby lessening physiological “resistance.” Naming the emotion you are detecting in a person’s demeanor, face, or statements actually releases its grip on the person’s thinking ability. “*You feel angry,*” “*You’re upset by,*” or “*You’re saddened by . . .*” are effective ways to communicate your understanding. We’ve found that using the pronoun *you* is far more effective than using the pronoun *I*. “I hear that you are feeling upset,” is subconsciously taken as a message about you, not the person to whom you are listening.

Paraphrasing, Positivity, and Productiveness: As seen in the previous chapter on Interpersonal Trust, Losada (1999) found that the highest-performing teams inquire more than they advocate—about three times as much. A culture of paraphrasing permits such inquiring about the thoughts of another.

We are aware of at least three primary reasons a team member might paraphrase. William Powell (personal communication, 2013), former international educator, cognitive theorist, school head, and good friend, helped us identify the types of listening that enhance team thinking. While each is a form of reflecting, it seems the way we listen may depend on our intention, as follows:

- We paraphrase to acknowledge and clarify our understanding of the emotion and particulars. This involves reflective listening.
 - We paraphrase to organize content from several speakers or to put various ideas from a single speaker into categories or containers. This requires analytical listening.
 - We paraphrase to shift the conversation to a higher level of abstraction, perhaps illuminating values, concepts, goals, or assumptions. This requires inferential listening.
3. **Posing Questions:** Pausing and paraphrasing create the conditions in which questions can be received without defensiveness. Both tone and syntax make the difference between a question that feels threatening and one in which a person feels free to thoughtfully respond. Questions to explore thinking often ask about a group member's perceptions, assumptions, or interpretations. Some examples (Garmston and Wellman, 2016 p. 47) include the following:

- What might be some reasons our four-year-olds ask more questions than our six-year-olds?
- What might be some of the assumptions we have about . . . ?

4. **Presuming Positive Intentions:** Presuming positive intentions contributes to feelings of mutual respect and psychological safety. Superintendent Haley's inappropriate remarks in an earlier example reveal that he was attempting to summarize the weekend while he struggled with disorientation. The curriculum director assumed Haley's intentions were good but were not congruent with his behavior. So, with grace and respect for Haley, he intervened. We hold this idea as fundamental to interactions with others. People behave in ways intended to support themselves. Sometimes these behaviors might be counterproductive. *He raised his voice, pounded the table, and said he was fed up with debating.* We are wired evolutionarily to perceive such statements as threatening. Our instinctive response is to protect ourselves. Unconsciously, we've judged the person is against us.

Examining the behavior from the shouter's experience, however, we might imagine he is overloaded with information and needs time to think. Or he has an urgent meeting after this and wants to end the meeting. Or . . . Actually, it doesn't matter what motivated the outburst; we have learned over many years that the behavior is *always* intended to protect the person in some way. When our response presumes positive intentions, we might say, "*Charlie, you're exasperated! This seems like it will never end!*"—a reflective paraphrase. Assuming positive intentions conveys respect. It most often is returned.

Pausing, paraphrasing, posing questions, and presuming positive intentions have been found to be transformational for teams. Together they are the essence of inquiry, the core of assessing student work and a primary principle of collaborative work.