Ensuring Collaborative Partnerships:

Strategies for Effective Meetings, Decision-Making, and Conflict Resolution

Early Childhood National Centers

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Program Management and Fiscal Operations

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Introduction

Collaborating with partners, particularly as partnerships begin, can seem quite simple. Typically, everyone enters on their best behavior with the intent of getting along well. Challenges can occur when the needs of the partnership interact with individual personalities. Take time to set the tone of the partnership and develop trusting relationships among members. It can be the most beneficial investment the partners can make to ensure healthy, successful, and lasting partnerships. Programs and partners can use this document to help plan effective meetings where members collaboratively reach decisions and resolve conflicts as they occur. When partners address issues together, they can create the unique operating structure that works best for them and set the tone for a truly collaborative partnership.

Maximizing Meeting Time

"On average, office workers spend 21 percent of their time in meetings and feel 25 percent of it is wasted, according to the results of a recent survey of 1,000 employees by Accountemps. One of the top complaints was that meetings are called to relay information that could have been communicated via e-mail. In a Harvard Business School study last year, researchers found that 71 percent of the 182 senior managers interviewed said meetings were unproductive and inefficient, and 65 percent said meetings kept them from completing their work."[1] Other research has shown that team productivity suffers as a result of poor communication in meetings.

[1] Meinert, D. 7 Steps to Running Better Meetings. (Oct. 30, 2018). Retrieved from https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1118/pages/7-steps-to-running-better-meetings.aspx

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Conducting Effective Meetings

Meetings are part of organizing and directing the work that needs to be done annually, monthly, weekly, daily, and even hour-by-hour. They provide the forum for communicating, making decisions, planning actions, and evaluating results. Ongoing and transparent communication is critical to an effective workplace organizational structure. Meeting to communicate and think together can lead to more strategic planning and effort. Additionally, meetings are opportunities to foster a positive team culture.

Every group conducts meetings in different ways and for varying reasons. We have all been to meetings that do not yield necessary decisions or significant action steps; nor do they support the planning or implementation of the work. Considering the time and energy it takes, with little to no return on our investment, such meetings often result in frustration and disengagement over time. This can lead organizations into downward spirals of apathy.

High-functioning learning organizations have an effective structure in place which ensures successful and time-efficient meetings. What makes these so effective? Is it the agenda, the facilitator, the particular group or individual members, or all of these and more?

In most cases, these organizations have chosen to intentionally create a structure for conducting meetings. It helps them maintain a focus on the outcomes chosen by the group, enhancing the success of the partnership. They have considered most, if not all, of the following criteria for conducting meetings.

Planning for Meetings

- **What grouping or number of stakeholders could best support reaching desired and determined outcomes?**
  - Whole group, such as management from all collaborating partners?
  - Final group of decision-makers that will implement or direct implementation (e.g., executive directors and business owners)?
  - Service focus groups (e.g., managers of health, education, subsidy, disabilities, and community partners)?
  - Maximum group size to effectively make the needed decisions?

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- **What is the group's purpose in meeting?**
  - What is the expected and desired outcome of the group or meeting? Clarify as needed.
  - How will meeting support reaching the outcomes?
  - Consider asking the group: "If this meeting is wildly successful, what will people feel, know, and do as a result?"[2]

- **What structures would best serve the needs of the group?**
  - How will norms and expectations of the group be established, used, and modeled (e.g., respect of others, listen to understand, be present, engage in the dialogue, ensure all voices are heard and recognized to purposefully create a level playing field)?
  - How will the roles and responsibilities of each member of the group be determined, agreed to, and supported?
    - Will the meeting be facilitated by a specific person, or will facilitation rotate throughout the group?
    - Will a leader be chosen, or could the group truly benefit from working collaboratively?
  - How have expectations been established for showing up to the meeting prepared with assigned work completed?
    - How will accountability be addressed for responsibilities agreed to and decisions made?
    - How will commitment to sharing responsibility for the tone and productivity of the meeting be attained?
  - How will the agenda be planned for the amount of time allotted, disseminated, and facilitated, and by whom?
    - Who will send out any upcoming meeting reminders, including the agenda and items to be reviewed prior to the next meeting?
    - Will these roles be filled by one person, or rotated amongst the group?
    - How will timing for each agenda item be determined to ensure time for listening to the information, processing it, and coming to a decision about next steps?
  - How will the group encourage a sense of inquiry that inspires action?

[2] Bernstein, M. and Ringel, R. Plan a Better Meeting with Design Thinking. (Feb. 26, 2018). Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2018/02/plan-a-better-meeting-with-design-thinking

- How will the meeting incorporate debriefing (i.e., conveying information), reflection, queries, thinking, and mutual learning?
- How will decisions be reached?
  - What process will be used to fully define the situation prior to making decisions on next steps?
  - What data will serve as a foundational resource in guiding the meeting's decision-making?
  - How will ground-level ideas and solutions be solicited to ensure decisions are data-informed and responsive to the staff, families, children, and communities impacted?
- How will conflicts be addressed?
  - How will resistance to change be addressed?
- How could an Action Plan or Continuous Improvement Plan format be helpful in keeping a focus on reaching the determined outcome in the timeframe planned and allowing for progress updates and course corrections?

Outcome	Actions, Activities, and Strategies	Person Responsible	Resources Needed	Dates: 1. Target Complete 2. Actual Complete	Evaluation: Evidence of Success	Status
				1.		
				2.		

- How will the work be distributed?
  - Will there be committees formed to do the work, or will the whole group carry out the work identified?
- How will each group member's strengths be identified, and assignments tailored to those strengths?
- How will every group member's voice be heard ensuring thoughts and contributions from all members?
- How will the group dynamics be managed and by whom?
- What will be put into place to lessen the number of meetings over time as outcomes are reached and processes are in place?
- How could a bit of play be interwoven throughout the meeting?

- **Who will attend each meeting?**
  - Who has the most vested interest in achieving the purpose of the meeting?
  - How will coverage be arranged for those whose daily responsibilities involve direct care for children?

Meeting Logistics

- **Where and how will the meeting occur?**
  - Will meetings be in-person or virtual, or a mixture of both, to maximize participants' time?
    - Who will be responsible for arranging and setting up the in-person meeting or virtual space?
  - Where is a mutually convenient place to meet in-person (e.g., partner meeting room, coffee shop)?

- **What date and time work best to maximize participation?**
  - Could meetings occur cyclically (e.g., first Tuesday of the month at 10 a.m.) to minimize recreating a date and time each meeting?
  - How often will a meeting need to occur?
  - What systems will be put in place to ensure meetings start and end on time?
- **How will the meetings be kept on track, on time, and on topic with succinct sharing of thoughts?**
  - How will flexibility be offered to accommodate more time needed in some discussions?
  - Will a break be planned so that the group members have time for relationship-building and networking?
- **How will the meeting be documented and summarized?**
  - How and by whom will minutes or specific notes be taken and shared with group members following the meeting?
  - What level of detail is needed in the notes?
    - Must notes ensure that members understand decisions made, their role in implementation, and the tasks assigned for which they are accountable?

- Will a summary of each agenda item occur after being addressed, at the end of the meeting, or both?
  - Who will provide such a summary?
- Who, outside of group members, needs to be informed about the meeting or decisions made by the group?
- What meaningful decisions were made that significantly contributed to meeting outcomes?
- What are next steps?
  - What have group members agreed to do in preparation for the next meeting?
  - What is the confirmed date, time, and location of the next meeting?

How will the meetings be evaluated?

- How could a ***process observer*** be used to evaluate the processes of the meeting?
  - How will the process observer's report be shared and reflected on at the end of the meeting?
    - How will needed changes and supports be incorporated into future meeting processes?

Evaluating Meeting Effectiveness

The process observer's role is to objectively examine how the group members are interacting and following meeting processes chosen by the group. This objectivity enables the process observer to see the real challenges or blockages that need addressing versus just the surface issues. The processes observed include:

- Whether participants came prepared
- What kind of side conversations were occurring and how they impacted group processes
- If and how any conflicts were addressed and resolved
- Which participants did or did not contribute and how engaged they were
- If comments stayed on topic and were thoughtful
- How the flow of discussions occurred
- If and how the agenda was followed
- How the emotional tone of the meeting influenced outcomes

Additionally the process observer can observe any other process the group feels the need to observe and track to ensure progress. Review the Process Observer's Checklist for examples of what a process observer evaluates.

"Organizations that have learned how to think together and that know themselves are filled with intelligent action where people are constantly taking initiative."
Margaret Wheatley

? *Which effective meeting strategy will help you the most and how will you apply it?*

- How will the role of the process observer be rotated so that all members have the opportunity to observe the process?

- How are group members provided the opportunity to contribute to the agenda for the next meeting, the group dialogue, and decision-making?
- Considering trust evolves from more authentic and transparent communication, and the competence, integrity, and reliability of group members, how was trust deepened during this meeting?
- What did each member learn from the meeting?
- Was the space well-organized, comfortable, and inviting?
- How will it be determined when it is time to change the number of meetings or the context to better address desired outcomes?

- **What is the plan for follow-up regarding decisions made at the meetings?**
  - Will there be one group member or multiple members chosen or asked to volunteer to be accountable for each decision?
  - Will the decision be incorporated into the Action Plan or Continuous Improvement Plan?
  - Will the plan be reviewed at every meeting to ensure attention to and focus on progress?

As individualized as meetings need to be, there is no one method for conducting them that works best for all. Having the group who will be meeting respond to the questions above can ensure the meeting logistics work best for all. Investing the time in creating such a meeting structure will inevitably result in successful meetings leading to desired outcome(s) in a time and energy-effective manner. ■

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Making Collaborative Decisions

Decisions may seem somewhat straightforward to the leader that makes them. Yet, too often decisions from the top are not connected to the reality of day-to-day practices or the people engaged in them. Without meaning or context that leads to buy-in from the staff, implementation can fail.

In reviewing how high functioning learning organizations go about general decision-making, there is an effective structure in place. It ensures the program is gathering and using pertinent data from all sectors and involved persons. In most cases, these organizations have chosen to create a comprehensive structure for decision-making with a continued vision and focus on the outcomes chosen by the group. They commit themselves to learning everything they can about the "why, how, who, what, where, and when" involved in the situation so the best decisions can be made. They have embraced a decision-making process that enables the group to know and see the whole picture before beginning to decide. Let's look at what might be considered to support such a process.

> "…life and its living systems offer great teachings on how to live in a world of continuous change and boundless creativity. And foremost among life's teachings is the recognition that human creativity and commitment are our greatest resources."
>
> Margaret Wheatley

Determine the following:

- Who needs to be involved in making the decision?
- Will decisions be made by group majority vote, the lead, consensus based on everyone's best thinking, or some other way?
- What methods or strategies will be used to come to a decision?
- What data needs to be gathered and by whom to support the best decision?

Strategies chosen for making decisions should include some or all of the following elements:

- Set the tone for collaborative decision-making (e.g., welcome everyone and their ideas to the table)
- Clearly articulate both the big picture and details of the situation needing a decision, including possible outcomes of each idea proposed
- Explore current and existing data along with the wealth of ideas generated by group members
- Listen to all participants
- Ask for clarification as needed

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- Hear every voice
  - Use different techniques to ensure decisions reached are responsive to the communities involved
- Summarize ideas presented
- Determine the feasibility of each idea
- Select the best possible idea and make a decision

As a follow-up to ensure the best decision is made and supported by all:

- Confirm that all involved can articulate why they made the decision they did, both individually and as a group.
- Determine how everyone will make a commitment (e.g., in word or writing) to fully support the decision

How are decisions made in your program, and which strategies would help make the process more collaborative?

It is crucial to avoid feeling compelled to make an immediate decision. Taking the time to inquire, explore, and wonder allows the group to know and see the whole picture before making a decision. This can have impressive effects leading to the outcomes desired. ■

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"Conflict arises, tragically, from an inability to understand and from the powerful emotions which, out of misunderstanding, lead to distrust and fear."

Prince Charles

Addressing Conflict

Conflict is an unavoidable part of life. We grow, learn, and develop greater understanding when we engage in conflict. Learning about differing opinions and points of view can propel everyone's thinking and open otherwise unimaginable possibilities. Developing the skills to both recognize and address conflict can lead to better productivity, creativity, cooperation, collaboration, and retention. Conflict provides us all the opportunity to widen our view of the world in which we live.

Conflict often is a result of a communication breakdown. Examples of breakdown include lack of communication, hasty communication that paints an incomplete picture (e.g., text message), or miscommunication resulting from a lack of understanding or information. Avoiding addressing the beginning stages of conflict can lead to arguments that get out of hand. Instead, use the following proactive approaches:

- Addressing and resolving issues before they actually become a conflict
- Determining and keeping lines of communication open, transparent, and frequent
- Committing to and engaging in a positive workplace culture that promotes seeing conflict as an opportunity for growth and learning
- Incorporating compassion, empathy, finding common ground, and generative listening
- Embracing transparency and honest dialogue
- Valuing all opinions, and assuming the positive intent of every communication
- Reviewing, updating, and ensuring policies, procedures and job descriptions clearly define such expectations

"The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

M. Scott Peck

Once conflict occurs, resolution needs to include well-defined, accurate, informative, and timely communication with all members involved. The diverse perspective each member brings to a team can propel or stall resolution. Each members' contributions in terms of power, values, attitudes, needs, motivations, and social factors as well as resources, knowledge, and ideas, has an impact on effective resolution of conflict. Programs can greatly influence how they achieve resolution with how they proactively address this diversity. For example, how they promote and sustain the human capital of each member of the organization impacts how they reach resolution. Additionally, how the members intrinsically connect to the organization—how they regard their purpose within it—will influence resolution. The use of authentic communication, is also crucial to reaching positive outcomes. Authentic communication is realistic and genuine; it conveys self-respect and respect for others. This can be challenging for some.

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"If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."

Albert Einstein

Developing a structure for conflict resolution, or solution discovery, and becoming competent in its use can support strong and healthy organizations. The use of a facilitator can also be helpful. This person can offer the objectivity needed to point out commonalities. A process to follow could include some or all of the following steps:

- Acknowledge that a conflict or challenging situation exists
- Set the tone for resolution (e.g., breathe, be sure everyone has a drink of water, etc.)
- Let all parties involved in the conflict express the situation or conflict from their viewpoint
- Define the conflict in elaborate detail; clarify points as needed to bring a wider lens to the situation
- Articulate a common understanding of each party's motivation, objectives, and needs
- Determine common areas of agreement (e.g., what the conflict is about, the procedure to follow, concerns, change needed, etc.)
- Explore possible solutions (e.g., generate possibilities together)
- Determine actions that support addressing all needs and secure agreement
- Decide how all parties will be held accountable for the actions determined (put this in writing)
- Determine what to do if the conflict is not resolved after an agreed upon period of time
- Reflect on the teaching and learning opportunities the conflict presented
- Recognize and value each party for being vulnerable and courageous enough to resolve the challenge

It can be helpful to appreciate the complexity of problems and avoid the desire to solve the problem before it has been fully defined. Following this approach compels the entity presenting the problem to see some of the unseen issues before attempting to resolve it. ■

In summary, any and all efforts by an organization to create structures for conducting effective meetings, engaging in collaborative decision-making, and addressing conflict, will reap tremendous benefits in the form of organizational efficiency and growth of human capacity. These are elements of high-functioning organizations that model and provide the most valuable services to children and families.

? *Does your program have procedures for conflict resolution? How do these strategies improve program culture and team productivity?*

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