

Communication Skills for Effective Collaboration

The value of professional learning communities comes from participants feeling safe to give and receive feedback, explore solutions to challenges, and test new ideas without fear of judgement. Effective communication is central to creating the safety to grow individually and as a group. Below are some suggestions for communication practices that support effective collaboration.

Listen actively

- Concentrate on what the speaker has to say.
- Maintain eye contact and use nonverbal signals to let the speaker know you're engaged.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues of speaker. This can help with attuning to the underlying emotional content.
- Avoid interrupting and set aside judgements.
- Pause before responding to make sure speaker is finished. If you feel an urgency to jump in, this may be a signal that you're not listening as well as you could.
- Paraphrase what you are hearing to check for understanding.
- Pay attention to your reactions - if something makes your pulse increase, pause and breathe before responding. Acknowledging and owning your reactions can be helpful too.

Be curious

- Ask questions to deepen your understanding of the situation.
- Ask questions to probe an idea.
- Be a thought partner, not a lecturer. Explore solutions together.
- Listen actively to responses.

Provide effective feedback

- Only provide feedback with permission or when it is the goal of an activity such as peer observation.
- Avoid giving advice - work to explore ideas with curiosity. "I wonder if xyz might help?" Or, "have you tried (or thought about) xyz?"
- Balance positive with negative feedback. Start with sincere positive observations before jumping into critiquing performance or challenging an idea.
- Be direct and honest with people as a consistent practice.
- Be kind.
- Be specific - the more detailed you can be, the better.
- Be helpful - make sure your suggestions are relevant to the objectives of the situation or to the learning goals of the other party.
- Give potentially sensitive feedback privately, not in front of others.

Speak concisely and sensitively

- Use as few words as possible so there is more time for exploring new ideas and solutions.
- Focus on getting to a solution when you talk about problems. Avoid just complaining.
- Pay attention to your body language and keep it active but not distracting.
- Scan and make eye contact with everyone as you speak so everyone feels included and invited into the conversation.