



# Center for Adaptive Schools

## Building Capacities for School Improvement

## Promoting a Spirit of Inquiry

*We can make our world significant by the courage of our questions and the depth of our answers.*

❖ Carl Sagan

High-functioning groups and group members infuse their work with a spirit of inquiry. Inquiry, in its Old English roots, meant learning or developing understanding. The process of inquiry is central to professional communities that produce stable gains in student learning. Learning at its roots is a questioning process driven by curiosity. Successful collaboration embraces the practices and patterns of shared inquiry. Inquiry presumes an openness to, a curiosity about, and an investment in the ideas of others. The physicist David Bohm has noted that thought is "...largely a collective phenomenon." Thoughts, like electrons, are shaped by their interactions with others (Senge, 1990).

To inquire is to ask, be curious, invite expression of thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. It includes conferring, consulting, wondering, requesting, investigating, examining and probing ideas. Richard Elmore (2000) notes that "...the knowledge we need to solve problems [in schools] often doesn't reside close at hand; it has to be found through active inquiry and analysis." Such work is not always the norm in schools. Collaborative interactions can be fraught with the tensions and the fears of being judged or of being perceived as one who might be judging others.

Teaching as a private practice has a deep cultural history. Breaking and reshaping the patterns in a culture requires both skill and commitment to the ongoing process of building and sustaining community. Teaching is in many ways a telling profession. Teachers tell students what they need to know and how to do the things they need to learn how to do. This telling behavior often carries over into patterns of adult communication as we tell others our stories, thoughts and opinions or wait for our turn to do so. This culture of telling and advocacy defines much of the interaction in adult groups in modern western culture. We are often caught up in the tyranny of *or*, according to Collins and Porras (1997). Things must be either right or wrong, true or false, yes or no.

Dichotomous thinking is closely associated with dichotomous questions, which in turn can tend to polarize group members. The art of asking invitational questions that avoid these dichotomies is the heart of collaborative inquiry. Invitational questions form connections between people and ideas as well as between ideas and other ideas.

All group work is about relationships. Relationships define and shape patterns of discourse. These relationships are influenced by who initiates a query and the form of that query. Who responds and how (s)he responds is a direct result of the ways in which the topic is initiated. Form, function, and outcome are linked within an emotional and social system that can open and expand thinking and create new possibilities, when handled with care.

The patterns of inquiry that result from consistent application of the seven Norms of Collaboration – such as presuming positive intentions in others, listening for understanding, posing invitational questions, and putting ideas on the table for engagement by others – lead to deeper understanding and to better-informed action. This understanding and these actions can be internal in the minds of participants and external in their behaviors. As we grapple with ideas and perspectives, we come to know others and ourselves more deeply. To do so requires us to reflect on our inner and outer responses to data, points of view, and events. Purposeful inquiry helps us to interpret personal and collective values and the implications of these as we live them out in our organizations. Skillful inquiry also helps us to clarify our priorities for a topic on the table. Where does this issue fit in the bigger picture? In what ways is this topic important and in what ways might the topic be a distraction from others?

In the end, what we talk about and how we talk to one another both matter, as ways of living out our beliefs about the world and how it works, our beliefs about the group and its purposes, and our beliefs about our personal place in both arenas. What we talk about and how we talk also define who we are and ultimately who we become. By promoting a spirit of inquiry within our groups, we make an investment in our personal and collective futures, as well as those of the people whom we serve.

Adapted from: *Syllabus for **The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups***. Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2009.