

Putting Ideas on the Table

Ideas define the content of a professional community's learning. Ideas originate with individuals. To be effective in advancing a group's tasks and processes, they must be released by the originating individual by being "put on the table" for others to engage with. When ideas are spoken but not released, others tend to interact with the speaker in terms of their relationship with that individual rather than in terms of the merits of the idea. Knowing when and how to "put an idea on the table" and when to "take it off" are essential to a professional community's learning.

Thinking about ideas is a biochemical process that involves emotion as well as cognition, calling for the engagement of the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex engages to process new input when the brain is in a state of relaxed alertness, which we experience in circumstances of high challenge with low threat. We are wired to detect threat in the communication of others; this is the evolutionary history of the brain. To effectively put ideas on the table for the engagement of others, we use several approaches to support relaxed alertness.

In productive dialogue and discussion, group members may put new ideas on the table to open the conversation, or during the conversation – after a period of inquiring and probing into others' thinking about a topic. As one inquires and probes in the conversation, the guiding intention is to make visible the thinking of others. When one puts his or her own ideas on the table, the underlying intention is dramatically different: **to make one's own thinking visible, in a way that supports others in engaging with the ideas.** This calls for paying attention to the relaxed alertness of those to whom the ideas are offered. This can be accomplished with a set of approaches that support effectively putting ideas on the table for the engagement of others.

Honor Cognitive Styles and Representational Systems

The first is alertness to the **cognitive styles** of group members. Ideas can be framed for either global or more concrete and sequential thinkers. They can be framed to emphasize emotions or concepts. **Representational systems** are also known as sensory modalities. We tend to rely on one or another over others. Ideas can be stated in ways that align with visual, auditory, or kinesthetic representational systems. These choices rest on a speaker's awareness of the preferences of others in the group. We increase the likelihood that ideas that we put on the table will be engaged by others, as we consciously choose language that aligns with the representational system, or sensory modality, that they prefer or use most frequently.

Signal Intention

Signaling the intention to put an idea on the table is an important way to support the relaxed alertness of group members. When initiating a conversation, it indicates openness for engagement with the idea. When shifting from inquiring and probing, it acknowledges significantly different intention. Making the shift transparent supports conditions of high challenge with low threat. Examples follow.

