

Stretching Your Collaborative Learning Edges

Agenda

**“Our Conversations Invent Us”
Relational Trust-Research/Self-Assessment
5 Facets: Introduction/Assertions
Reflection/Next Steps**

**Jennifer Abrams, Communications Consultant
jennifer@jenniferabrams.com
www.jenniferabrams.com
@jenniferabrams**

Jennifer Abrams - Bio

Jennifer Abrams is an international educational and communications consultant for public and independent schools, universities and non-profits. Jennifer trains and coaches teachers, administrators and others on new teacher/employee support, having hard conversations, collaboration skills and being your best adult self at work.

In her over two decades at Palo Alto Unified School District (Palo Alto, CA, USA), Jennifer was a high school English teacher, new teacher coach, and professional development facilitator. She left PAUSD in 2012 to start her full time communications consultancy in which she works with schools and organizations around the globe.

Jennifer presents at annual North American-based conferences such as Learning Forward, ASCD, NASSP, NAESP, AMLE, ISACS and the New Teacher Center Annual Symposium among others. Internationally, she facilitated with the Teachers' and Principals' Centers for International School Leadership (TTC and PTC) and presents with EARCOS, NESA, ECIS, AISA, AMISA, CEESA and Tri-Association, and consults with schools across Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, North, Central, and South America.

Jennifer's publications include *Having Hard Conversations*, *The Multigenerational Workplace: Communicating, Collaborating & Creating Community* and *Hard Conversations Unpacked – the Whos, the Whens and the What Ifs*, *Swimming in the Deep End: Four Foundational Skills for Leading Successful School Initiatives*, and her newest book, *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work*.

Jennifer has been recognized as one of “21 Women All K-12 Educators Need to Know” by Education Week’s ‘Finding Common Ground’ blog. She considers herself a “voice coach,” helping others learn how to best use their voices – be it collaborating on a team, presenting in front of a group, coaching a colleague, supervising an employee. Jennifer can be reached at jennifer@jenniferabrams.com, www.jenniferabrams.com, and on Twitter @jenniferabrams.

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Our conversations invent us. Through our speech and our silence, we become smaller or larger selves. Through our speech and our silence, we diminish or enhance the other person, and we narrow or expand the possibilities between us. How we use our voice determines the quality of our relationships, who we are in the world, and what the world can be and might become. Clearly, a lot is at stake here.

Harriet Lerner, The Dance of Connection

Trust – Research by Bryk and Schneider

Organizations with a high degree of trust are more likely to make changes that help the group achieve. According to these researchers, there are four vital signs for identifying and assessing trust.

Respect: Do we acknowledge one another's dignity and ideas? Do we interact in a courteous way?

Competence: Do we believe in each other's ability and willingness to fulfill our responsibilities effectively?

Personal regard: Do we care about each other personally and professionally? Are we willing to go beyond our formal roles and responsibilities to go the extra mile?

Integrity: Can we trust each other to put the interests of students first, especially when tough decisions have to be made? Do we keep our word?

What are your thoughts about the degree of trust in your department/school? What do you think are some of the changes that you could personally make to increase the trust?

Engage in Reciprocity: Exercises for Development

All of these exercises align with the parts of the continuum and the self-assessment in one way or another. There is no specific sequence for these exercises. All thinking and reflection is good.

Remember:

- These are intentionally called exercises, in contrast to activities. The goal is to develop in this facet. This type of growth doesn't always feel good or easy.
- You can decide which exercises align with your specific focus within the continuum for this facet. You can do some of the exercises—or you can do them all. Self-determination rules.
- There is no expectation that the exercises be done perfectly; there is no perfect score.
- There is no time limit on how long an exercise should take.



EXERCISE 1: Bottom Line Professionalism in a Team

Purpose: To have a baseline understanding of what professionalism can look like in a school environment.

Guiding Tips: This isn't an exhaustive description of the skills to be a professional. It is a basic list, encompassing foundational behaviors that are expected from all team members, and a starting point from which to assess one's collaborative skills.

Directions: Consider these questions and determine your answers. Take note of where you are challenged by specific behaviors.

- Am I mentally present in meetings? Do I show up on time or late? Am I present emotionally and mentally at staff meetings? Department meetings? At team meetings?

- Do I know, understand, respect, and follow my job description? My department's goals and objectives? The mission and vision of my organization?

- If I'm asked to complete paperwork, attend a meeting on behalf of the department, or do work for the team, do I get it done? On time?

- Do I share enthusiasm for the work? If so, how do I demonstrate that to my teammates?

STRETCHING YOUR LEARNING EDGES: GROWING (UP) AT WORK

- Do I outwardly demonstrate that I enjoy my work? Enjoy my workplace? Enjoy my colleagues? How do I show my teammates that I am engaged?

- Are my communications with others done in a timely manner?

- Do I hold myself to a high standard for what I do and produce? If so, how do I demonstrate that?

- Do I continually refine my skill set? If so, how?

- Am I aware of my workplace's values, norms, and the way the organization sees itself? Do I work well with these values? If so, how? Do I embody these values and norms?

- Do I hone my communication skills in addition to working on my technical expertise? If so, how?

- Do I show consideration for others' feelings? Do I say things like, "Hello," "Thank you," "I'm sorry," and "What can I do to help?"

- Do I gossip? Do I say negative things about colleagues to others?

- Am I aware of my assumptions and values, and do I know when my assumptions get in the way of the team's progress toward goals?

- Am I able to stand outside myself and see how I might affect others or be seen by others?

- If I am given feedback, do I listen to it and react appropriately, changing my behavior if necessary?

- Can I recognize and understand that someone else's decision making might be more rational or emotional than mine, and can I work with that person?

- Am I open to changing my approach to completing a task rather than taking a "my way or the highway" view?

- Am I willing to hear perspectives different from my own? Do I honor other perspectives by listening to understand, or do I shut down when I hear them?

- Do I cooperate with other departments in my workplace so we better reach those we serve? Do I fill out any needed paperwork or reports and do so with a positive attitude?

- Am I able to listen with understanding and empathy?

- Do I use language that demonstrates my belief that my teammates are competent and capable? Do I offer suggestions (Perhaps you could...) rather than statements (You should...) so people can take action on their own behalf?

- Am I aware when I am not allowing equitable participation in a meeting by talking too much and dominating or too little and not contributing?

Post-Exercise Reflection:

- What did I notice about myself in my responses?
- What might steps might I take next to work on any of these foundational skills?



EXERCISE 2: Creating Positive Affective States

Purpose: To recognize the impact an individual has on a team's emotional state and other members' safety.

Guiding Tips: This list is not exhaustive and is not “the top 5 behaviors that make or break a group's efficacy.” Yet these behaviors affect a group, and teammates are responsible for managing themselves during group interactions. Every team member intentionally or unintentionally contributes to a feeling of psychological safety through verbal and nonverbal language as well through actions.

Directions: Respond to the questions and ask yourself where your strengths are and where you have learning edges.

- Do I manage my anxiety appropriately? Do I yell at colleagues? Do I sigh deeply in response to others? Do I turn my back to group members?

- Am I aware of my body language when I am with others? Do I have appropriate, respectful, and proper sense of decorum in specific settings?

- Do I have a sense of my own and others' personal space in a given setting?

- When communicating with others, do I ask for perspectives and seek out others' opinions?

- Do I demonstrate my ability to listen and pause? Do I demonstrate that I understand what I hear?

- Do I manage impulsivity or do I interrupt others? Do I insert my point of view more often than others do?

- Do I enter the group with a sense of humor? Can I laugh at myself?

Psychological safety is when you have a culture in which it isn't expensive to be yourself.

—Timothy R. Clark, author, *The Four Stages of Psychological Safety*

CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

“Psychological safety represents the extent to which the team views the social climate as conducive to interpersonal risk.”

—Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School professor

Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work Assertions

- We need to have a different orientation to our development as our world and our Work becomes more complex
- We can grow psychologically, cognitively and emotionally - even when we are done growing physically
- Neuroplasticity is possible (i.e. growth mindset)
- Schools must support both child **and** adult development
- Human development is not an indulgence
- We must work on developing ourselves in order to be better educators and bigger human beings

5 Facets – Stretching Your Learning Edges

Know Your Identity(ies)

- You know yourself, your history, your biases, your values, your limitations and your motivations.
- You know how your upbringing and your experiences impact your work with colleagues and students.

Suspend Certainty

- You have the ability to remain open to multiple possibilities and multiple points of view.
- You prepare to be wrong and own your limitations and fallibility.

Take Responsibility

- You take ownership for your part of a work product.
- You take responsibility for how you interact with others.
- You take responsibility for your own personal and professional development.

Engage in Reciprocity

- You recognize your responsibility to work with others in humane and growth producing ways.
- You continue to grow your skillset to do so.
- You live ‘out loud’ a mutual respect for colleagues, students and families and the community.

Build Resiliency

- You work on your own emotional & psychological hygiene so you are healthy for yourself and you are healthy for others.
- You build up your bandwidth and ‘stomach’ to feel more comfortable with the ambiguity of your work.
- You manage your disappointment and sustain your commitment to the work ahead.

There is an “I” in Team - [The International Educator](#)
By Jennifer Abrams 02-Feb-22

Collaboration is one of the most frequently used words in education and, in some ways, the least taught. As a former teacher, new teacher coach, and professional development facilitator in a US school district for over two decades I learned that I had a credential in my subject but I didn't have a credential in how to collaborate and work with other adults. The work we do in our field requires us to know how to effectively teach inside our classrooms and communicate to others outside our classrooms. Both skill sets matter for us to improve student achievement and wellbeing and to create school cultures that are humane and inclusive.

Over the last decade my focus in my consulting work has been around adult to adult communication in schools. How do we stretch ourselves at our learning edges to become our best adult selves at school? How do we communicate well with one another in service of our students? This article series will focus on how we can stretch ourselves around five essential areas of professional behavior: knowing ourselves, suspending certainty, taking responsibility for our interactions, engaging in reciprocity, and building resiliency.

One may notice that stretching ourselves is what we have been doing now for months and actually years. Educators worldwide have been dealing with COVID and other professional challenges. We fear asking anymore of anyone.

It is at this most challenging time that building our adult to adult communication skills is even more critical. Yes, the demands are ever increasing. We still have within ourselves an ability to act in ways that align with the goal of having our schools be humane and respectful places to work.

Our ability to collaborate and our willingness to engage respectfully with one another matters for the health of the school and the collective well-being of all within it. We can and must intentionally ask ourselves how to live respectfully even in the midst of the challenges we are facing.

Cambridge Dictionary says Reciprocity is “behavior in which two people or groups of people give each other help and advantages; a situation in which two groups agree to help each other by behaving in the same way or by giving each other similar advantages.” We need to think about our work in schools including this type of behavior with the other adults as part of one's everyday work responsibility. It isn't just doing one's tasks or role; it isn't just doing “one's job” or going into one's classroom and working with students; it is also to be a value add to the other adults in the school.

Engaging In Reciprocity

WHAT IS IT?	WHY DOES IT MATTER?	WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?
Willingly moving oneself from isolation and separateness to a connection to and concern for community.	Honoring individual team members and valuing each person's gifts and contributions to the community is critical for a workplace that is grounded in a shared future.	Demonstrating a belief in the worth and dignity of all individuals with whom one works by modeling supportive and productive team behaviors: active listening, thoughtful questioning, offering supportive suggestions, using verbal and nonverbal behaviors that exhibit respect, and more.

Adapted from *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work* – Jennifer Abrams, 2021, MiraVia Publishing.

Things you can consider as you work to engage more effectively as a collaborative team member:

Do Inner Work To Contribute To The Whole

Being an effective team member requires us to be mindful of our body language and non-verbals, build our skills to do active listening, asking questions that others want to answer, learning how to apologize, and allow space for all voices to be heard. We all must do the inner work and manage emotions and energy and do the outer work of being mindful of our body language and choosing respectful wording.

Learn To Effectively Work With Cognitive Conflict

When we are stressed, we often don't engage in challenging conversations in the best of ways. As Timothy J. Clark states in *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation* (2020), a team needs to work with more intellectual friction and less social friction. Building your ability to discuss issues rather than individuals is key to staying cognitive in your conversations.

Be 100% Responsible For Your Responses

You are 100% responsible for how you respond to others and that includes how you ask questions, how you share disappointments, and how you share concerns. Asking, "How might I communicate my perspective humanely in a kind, supportive, and non-aggressive manner?" is a question we all need to be asking ourselves.

Understand "We Influence I" And "I Influences We"

The old adage often repeated in schools is that there is no "I" in team. That's a myth. Individuals matter. When recognized and valued, individual points of views and diverse ways of seeing the world contribute greatly to the fabric of the collective and the shared

future of a school. And the group as a collective also needs to be seen as a value-add to each team member's work.

Honor Others' Dignity

Mutual respect is something we live out loud. Engaging in reciprocity means we show others that we believe in their worth as human beings and we honor one another and what we each bring to the table. We need to create environments in which everyone is acknowledged, feels a sense of belonging, and is treated justly.

As we work on engaging as our best adult selves, we need to consistently focus not just on the content of our meetings with others but also on how we are doing in our interactions. We can ask:

- Do I know where my strengths and weaknesses as a group member are and do I work to address my weaknesses?
- Do I monitor my behavior in a team meeting so I am a value add to the meeting and not contributing to any social friction?
- Recognizing that cognitive conflict and intellectual friction can help a group move forward, do I monitor my behavior so I am not contributing to any unnecessary social friction?
- Do I understand that group structures, norms, and protocols which support cognitive and psychologically safe discussions, and do I willingly participate in those protocols with awareness and skill?

In my following articles I will look at four other essential areas where we can stretch ourselves at our learning edges and become even more effective professionals in our adult to adult communication. Our students look to us to see what being an adult looks like. Let's model for them being our best adult selves.

References

Abrams, Jennifer. *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work*. (2021).

Clark, Timothy J. *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation*. (2020)

Formerly a high school English teacher and a new teacher coach, Jennifer Abrams is currently a communications consultant who focuses on adult to adult communication in schools. Her publications include [Having Hard Conversations](#), [The Multigenerational Workplace: Communicate, Collaborate and Create Community](#) and [Hard Conversations Unpacked - the Whos, Whens and What Ifs](#) and [Swimming in the Deep End: Four Foundational Skills for Leading Successful School Initiatives](#). Her newest book is, *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work*. Internationally, Jennifer presented at PTC, TTC, EARCOS, NESA, ECIS, AISA, AMISA, CEESA and Tri-Association conferences, and at schools across Asia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South America and North America. More about Jennifer's work can be found at her website, www.jenniferabrams.com.
Twitter: @jenniferabrams

Final Reflection Questions

- What is still alive for you as you end today?
- What crossroads are you at as we finish today's session?
- What has been worthy of your time?
- What has your attention at this point?
What matters to you now?
- From today's learning what do you now know to reconstruct or interrupt the narrative at your school?
- What conversation can you have that will bring something new into the world?
- What was of meaning or value to you as a result of you being here?
- What flame do I want to I carry into all interactions from here on?
- What declaration do you want to make?
- What strikes you as important to share/discuss/reflect on at this time?