

# Preface

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**T**his book is designed for educators who find themselves needing to work in collaborative ways. For many who are used to working independently, this is a new way of doing business.

Today, when educators get together, they are less likely to be in a traditional meeting where information is dispensed to them and more likely to find themselves asking each other how they can better accomplish the challenges of improving student achievement.

For everyone who has ever asked, "Do we really need to have another meeting?" I have attempted to put together an outline that will help you answer that question. Sometimes the answer is no. In other cases, when meeting together can be beneficial, we need to develop the skills to make optimal use of our time.

In these pages, we look at how to decide whether getting a group together is the best way to accomplish the desired outcome, how to start a group, how to define the purpose of a meeting, and how to run an effective meeting. We review strategies for making decisions as a group and also review the steps for action plans.

Meetings can be valuable, helping develop a collaborative spirit; giving us an outlet for discussion, not just decision making; and changing the environment in which we work. It has been said that meetings are where an organization's culture perpetuates itself. If we adjust and improve what happens when we are together, we affect our own school culture and, ultimately, our ability to succeed with students in a high-pressured environment.

Groups are better than individuals alone for generating ideas and solving problems. Groups can help morale and help generate understanding, acceptance, and support for members. Acting as a group can help members sustain their support for the work and their own commitment. Group work can be a source of energy and renewal when the group is structured properly.

Just as there are different purposes for meetings, and some elements of this book will be appropriate to some of those and not to others, there also are different kinds of groups: elected groups, such as school boards, professional organizations, and boards of directors; appointed groups, such as advisory boards and committees; ad hoc or working groups, such as task forces or crisis intervention groups; and standing groups, such as school improvement committees, strategic-planning groups, grade-level teaching teams, and subject matter teams.

The issues and tools presented here can be used under different circumstances with many of the different groups. Facilitators working with any of the different groups should find some tools that will help in their work.

Planning, organizing, and carrying out our work in a collaborative setting (a meeting) is essential learning. Making efficient use of time spent working together is a necessity in our time-pressured society. We must learn how to use our time in groups and the skills to maximize what we can accomplish during that time.

This book is an attempt to assist in that effort.

Readers can browse through the highlighted tips for quick ideas to use in working groups; refer to the “Extended Readings” section to find texts that delve more deeply into specific needs, such as a book of “energizer activities”; and use the boxed pullouts for information that enhances specific topics within the text.

Each chapter contains steps outlining how to proceed with the issue at hand, from planning a meeting to creating an action plan. Follow the headlined steps to assist your own process, and use the handouts as tools when needed. The handouts included here offer forms and formats for tasks, such as voting, and for exercises, such as outlining the benefits and challenges of a planned option. These tools are reproducible for small groups.

While the topics are discrete, they are not entirely sequential. For example, one would certainly need to know about making decisions before convening a meeting. Readers may not be in groups that ever require action planning, or they may need to refer early to that chapter for a group set up specifically for that purpose. Each chapter builds on the last but can be read independently, as the reader needs.