

Guide for **COLLABORATIVE TEAM PRACTICES**



**MARYLAND COALITION FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TEAMS

When team members pay attention to how their team operates, they plan for effective communication and sharing of responsibilities. They also consider the characteristics of interactions among team members, and the outcomes of team work. Effective teams have a clear purpose, a belief in their ability to achieve that purpose, and individual members contribute their time and energy. To be efficient, teams need structure: norms and modes of operation.

COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

A collaborative team is a group of individuals who share common beliefs and work towards common goals. They meet regularly over an extended period of time. Collaborative planning and **teaming arrangements** for each school will be unique based on the needs of the faculty and student population in a given year. Shared decision making, flexibility, and creative problem solving strategies will help teachers in *their* transition to restructured roles.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND PRODUCTIVE TEAMS

Trust

When people sit around the table to meet, each one may have their own concerns and hopes about how the meeting will go, whether or not it will be productive, and how much the discussion will stay on task.

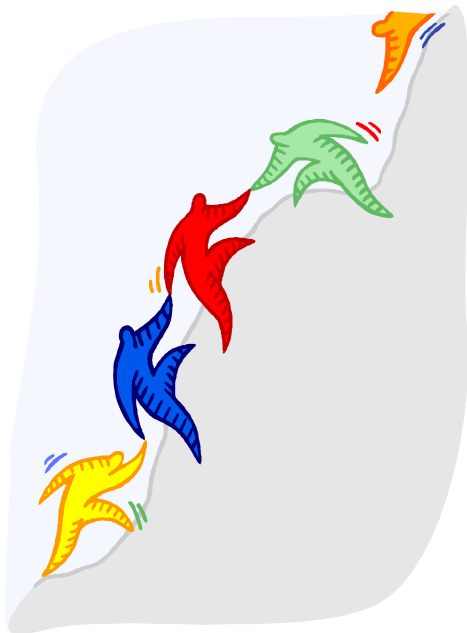
Trust may not be there. Trust is a shared belief that you can depend on each other to achieve a common purpose. Trust is the expectancy that people can rely on your word. It is built through integrity and consistency in relationships.

NORMS

Norms are the habits that influence the team/organization structure and patterns of behavior. The norms (or way in which a group behaves) become the lens through which the organization is viewed. They determine whether the group will be high-performing and productive or low-performing and nonproductive.

Social norms can also be viewed as statements that regulate behavior; they are the rules that a group uses for appropriate and inappropriate values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. These rules may be explicit or implicit. They can be formal (e.g., dress code) or informal (e.g., chatting with office support staff during breaks). In either case, it is good to periodically make sure that the expectations for behavior and performance are clear. Failure to stick to the rules can result in severe punishments, the most feared of which is exclusion from the group.

PLANNING TEAMS



It will not be efficient or logistically possible every person who has a stake in an issue or interest in a student to be regular participators, the team should have *core* and *extended* components.

Core Team: The core team is a small group of people who meet regularly to do the majority of the planning and is made up of the people who are most involved with the student on a daily basis, or most likely to deal with the issue on a regular basis. Not more than 8 people!

Extended Team: The extended team is composed of people who are important to the educational program and are available to provide support to the team. These members may be previous or future teachers, special and related or support personnel (for example, guidance counselors, psychologists, or the student's peers), usually an administrator once team practices in the school are in place, and sometimes district support staff.

Once the team has been established, there are some questions that must be answered to ensure consistency, efficiency, and communication and to reduce confusion or misunderstandings:

Once the team has been established, the team can decide how to handle situations to promote consistency, efficiency, and to reduce confusion or misunderstandings. Some considerations are:

- ❖ *Who communicates information to members not attending a particular meeting?*
- ❖ *Who is the designated contact person?*
- ❖ *How do team members deal with situations where an individual is not contributing, not attending regularly, or is not following through with their responsibility?*
- ❖ *If additional meetings are scheduled, who has responsibility for arranging them?*
- ❖ *Who has the power to cancel a meeting, and for what reasons?*
- ❖ *When can meetings be regularly scheduled so that all members can attend?*
- ❖ *How can team members be encouraged to participate*

FINDING COLLABORATIVE PLANNING TIME

Time to collaborate during the school day is a critical ingredient for implementing any educational innovation. It is also critical for planning the implementation of special education services and support in general education classes. Teachers and related services staff need to share their expertise, clarify barriers to implementing services, find solutions to behavioral and academic challenges presented by students, and design plans for individual and groups of students.

In research articles and conversations with teachers, collaborative planning time is described in two ways: as a critical ingredient for successful school reform and as an unattainable solution to the most persistent problems in education (Fullan and Miles, 1992; _____). When adults in schools consistently have time together to exchange ideas, their interactions with students are more likely to reflect best educational practice. Disagreements and misunderstandings can be aired and resolved more quickly; changes to the schedule can be discussed and instructional or behavioral innovations can be clarified before they are implemented.

Lack of time for adults to collaborate is a persistent barrier to implementing quality educational services. Individual team members may be assigned to support the same student or several students. But if teachers may not have the same understanding of their roles and expectations; and they may not have the same vision for the student's program. Without time for discussion, adults who serve students in the same classroom may not be equal partners, may not be as effective as they could be, and may inadvertently work at cross-purposes. Although finding collaborative planning time may be one of the most difficult problems for schools to solve, it is central to successfully supporting all students and is the means to finding practical solutions.

The lack of time for adults to collaborate is a persistent barrier to systematic change and the implementation of inclusive education services.

Over the last 15 years, the Maryland State Department of Education has supported initiatives through the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education to promote inclusive education practices. Schools participating in the projects have identified various ways to find planning time for staff. Some ideas implemented have been:

At the Elementary Level

1. Fabulous Fridays: Each Friday or every other Friday, the PE and Music teacher collaborate together to take each grade level for a combined activity to free grade level teams to plan collaboratively. For example:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| 9:00 – 10:30 a.m. | All first graders go to activity at the same time |
| 10:30 - 11:30 a.m. | All second graders go to activity at the same time |
| 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. | All third graders go to activity at the same time |

The next week schedule would continue with kindergarten, fourth and fifth grade before it repeats.

2. Use substitute teachers on a rotating basis to free grade level teachers to plan together monthly or quarterly. This strategy is typically used at the beginning of each semester to allow grade-

level teams to work on lesson plans for units across the semester. Each team could meet for three hours. Two teams a day can meet until all grade level teams have met. Substitute teachers could be used on a monthly basis for specific teams supporting students who have significant teams, rotating during the day for student teams.

3. Schedule special area subject teachers (physical education, computer technology, art, music) at the same time in the same grade level to allow grade level team members to meet together.
4. Identify the teachers who may need one or two occasions for extra time together for to address a specific issue or concern. These teachers may be given a duty-free time block, coverage for early morning arrival or end of day dismissal time; or other episodic opportunities.
5. Administrator Action: the school principal or assistant principal provides periodic coverage of classes when the classroom teacher needs to meet with the special education teacher.
6. Double dismissal: one teacher dismisses two classes so that the other teacher can plan with related or special education service providers. In addition, once a month, the time designated for faculty meetings is used for grade level collaboration between general educators and resource teachers.

In order to stay within available time limits, team members must have and follow an agenda and take on the roles of facilitator, time keeper, and recorder.

At the Middle School Level

1. Use planning time allotted to grade level teams on a regularly scheduled basis to ***collaboratively*** plan.
2. Several schools in Maryland have taken advantage of the large pool of parent volunteers that they have available. The parents' services are organized by a volunteer coordinator who responds to teacher requests for support in a classroom or with a special project. When classes are combined for assemblies or to free a teacher for collaborative planning, parent volunteers provide students with additional encouragement and supervision so teachers can meet together.
3. Many schools are able to create opportunities for daily collaborative planning by scheduling teams to have the same lunch periods immediately followed by a common preparation period. By establishing "working lunch" meetings, teams are therefore allotted up to an hour of time together.
4. Develop a course for professional development credit that is structured to document teacher time and products. Teachers who sign up for the course meet after school, often with a school system consulting teacher, to design innovative plans for students with intense needs, and to plan to implement accommodations and modifications for an upcoming unit.

COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

Collaborative skills are **social skills, which help people work cooperatively and productively together**. One of the most important functions of the team is to use collaborative skills to create an atmosphere conducive to **building trust, solving problems and resolving conflicts**.

Active Listening

An active listener interprets what another person has said as in: "what you mean is..." You are listening actively when you :

- ↪ Demonstrate a sincere desire to pay attention to the other person (instead of mentally practicing what you are going to say next).
- ↪ Relate to his or her perspective and empathize with his or her point of view.
- ↪ Pay attention and don't be distracted by other things in the environment.
- ↪ Ensure you have interpreted the message as intended through feedback, confirming, restating, or paraphrasing.
- ↪ Reflect on what is being said.
- ↪ Clarify the information by **asking questions** and probing.
- ↪ Keep the conversation on what the speaker says, not on what interests you.
- ↪ Do not finish the sentence of others.
- ↪ Be aware of your biases and perceptions.
- ↪ Encourage the speaker; provide feedback and paraphrase to show you are listening.
- ↪ Summarize – walk the person through your analysis.

Understanding Cultural Differences

Culture is concerned with the beliefs and values on which people interpret experiences and behave, individually and in groups. It refers to a group or community with which you share common experiences that shape the way you understand the world. One person can belong to several different cultures depending on his or her birthplace; nationality; ethnicity; family status; gender; age; language; education; physical condition; sexual orientation; religion; profession; and place of work. Cultural differences play a key role in the creation of trust, since trust is built in different ways, and means different things in different cultures.



Culture is the "lens" through which you view the world. It is central to what you see, how you make sense of what you see, and how you express yourself.

TEAM MEETINGS

A **structure** for team meetings and **roles** on the team need to be established, and the **processes** for problem solving and decision-making need to be worked out.

Agenda: Should be set at the end of each meeting for the next meeting. Time limits should be assigned to each item, so that there is a realistic expectation about what can be accomplished. Frequently, teams will begin spending 10 minutes on “successes” and may have a standing item on the agenda if there is one issue that is consistently addressed by the team (e.g., behavior support plan, participation in a particular subject area, peer support plan, etc.).

Roles: In order to use your limited time most efficiently and to improve collaboration and participation by all members, many teams assign roles that can be rotated among the members. Rotation may be by volunteering, by alphabetical order assignment, or any other way agreed upon by the group. Who will do what at a meeting is usually decided at the previous meeting. At a minimum, teams need to have a **facilitator**, a **recorder**, and a **timekeeper**. Other roles, which are helpful, particularly in the beginning of team formation, are **encourager**, **jargon buster**, and **observer**. These are described below.

Meeting Content: Some teams **always** begin their meetings on some recent success related to work or personal sharing. Besides being an icebreaker, it sets a positive note and good feelings. If there is a major area that will be a consistent focus, the team may want to make this a standing agenda item. To allow for adequate discussion of items and to ensure that meetings don't go beyond the designated meeting time (usually between 30 and 60 minutes).

Celebrations!

Meeting Processes: Start on time, end on time. Establish group norms and stick with them (e.g., how notes are shared when someone is absent, who to encourage chronically absent members, how to deal with conflict and differences of opinion).

Team Decisions: Decisions made at the meeting that require action need to have the responsibility for that action assigned to individuals (or the group if the whole group will act) with a date specified by which the action will be taken.

Note Taking: Minutes or notes are critical to ensuring that all team members (present and absent) have the same information and can have a reminder of the topics covered, decisions made, tasks assigned, and responsibilities for between meetings. If a standard form is used, the recorder may take notes by hand and simply make copies of these notes at the end of the meeting for each member. It is helpful if the notes include space for tasks or assignments and the person responsible and date that the task is due so that members can more easily remember their responsibilities.



TEAM MEMBER ROLES

Facilitator: distributes the written agenda, moves the team through the discussion of each item, ensures that the team remains task-oriented, and keeps team members focused on the team goals. The facilitator seeks to clarify information and opinions, seeks out the input of members who are silent, pulls together the major ideas, and restates or summarizes the major points or decisions that are made. The facilitator also helps to solve the interpersonal problems between members by promoting open discussion in order to resolve conflicts and develop consensus. The facilitator asks the team to set the agenda for the next meeting and, if roles rotate, identifies who will take what roles for the next meeting.

Recorder: writes down the agenda items and all agreed-upon outcomes of the meeting. The recorder should check to make sure there is consensus of opinion before recording outcomes. The reporter asks for clarifications and summarizes the group discussion to ensure accurate reporting.

Timekeeper: keeps track of the time spent on each item according to how much time the team originally allocated for it. S/He signals the group shortly before the time is up to allow the group to wrap up the discussion. If the item requires more time than has been allocated, the group can defer the item for additional discussion at the next meeting (making it an agenda item) or eliminate another item which has lower priority (moving that item to the next meeting). The team should generally not extend its meeting time.

Encourager: warmly encourages everyone to participate, recognizing contributions, demonstrating acceptance of ideas, and being generally responsive to team members. To assign this role may seem artificial at first, but without this role being taken, members may not be reinforced for participating. Once a team is experienced, this role usually doesn't need to be assigned - it just happens naturally.

Jargon buster: reminds team members when they are using words that are not commonly understood by everyone. Asking for translation into everyday language often reminds members that common sense should prevail.

Observer: observes the team action and interaction and gives feedback to team members as a group on how well they did in their assigned roles and on collaboration. This is often very awkward when a team is first forming, which is the most critical time for feedback to occur. Some teams will periodically assign an observer to identify areas for improvement.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

1. Participation and Leadership: EQUALITY

All team members must be viewed as *equals* and participation needs to be encouraged and supported. The leadership role for meetings and tasks is assigned to the individual with the greatest expertise, with the greatest time (where expertise is not a factor), or on a rotating basis for repeated tasks of joint responsibility. One individual regularly performs some tasks, some are shared, and some are rotated. It is very important that all members regularly attend meetings; without this, individuals will not feel that they are responsible for decisions made by the group.

2. Development of Collaborative Goals

The goals and strategies of the team must be developed in a cooperative manner with a focus on the individual student. Articulating the team's goals is important to give the team direction in decision-making and to foster a clear understanding for the reason to gather and talk. Meeting the needs of individual team members must be secondary.

3. Communication

One of the biggest problems encountered by teams is the breakdown of communication or unclear communication channels. Team members must encourage each other to openly communicate their desires and concerns, with each member feeling comfortable enough to express opinions and thoughts on any issue, regardless of the extent of agreement with that opinion. Periodically, members need to revisit this topic to make sure that communications are clear, open, and encouraged.

4. Decision Making

The group of team members needs to come to agreement on *which and how* decisions will be made. Important decisions about team functioning and about the student should be the joint responsibility of all team members. Collaborative teams make decisions by consensus, which means that every member of the team agrees to the decision. Rather than a win and lose situation (as in voting), consensus means that everyone agrees to the decision following discussion by the group.

5. Brainstorming

When presented with a problem, it could be very unproductive and frustrating to keep talking about it and find no solution. Teams need to use some form of brainstorming technique to efficiently identify as many solutions as possible, and some way of either prioritizing or selecting the most useful alternatives. Brainstorming techniques involve some individual think time (usually 2 to 3 minutes) to come up with solutions that may be written to remember. A recorder should then write each idea down on a flip chart (either going around one at a time to each member or having all ideas called out) until no other ideas remain. This is usually followed by some wait time in which each member reviews the list and thinks about alternatives. These ideas may be clarified, prioritized, compared to some set criteria for what the solutions need to have, or combined. After discussion, the team selects the best ideas for action.

CONFLICT

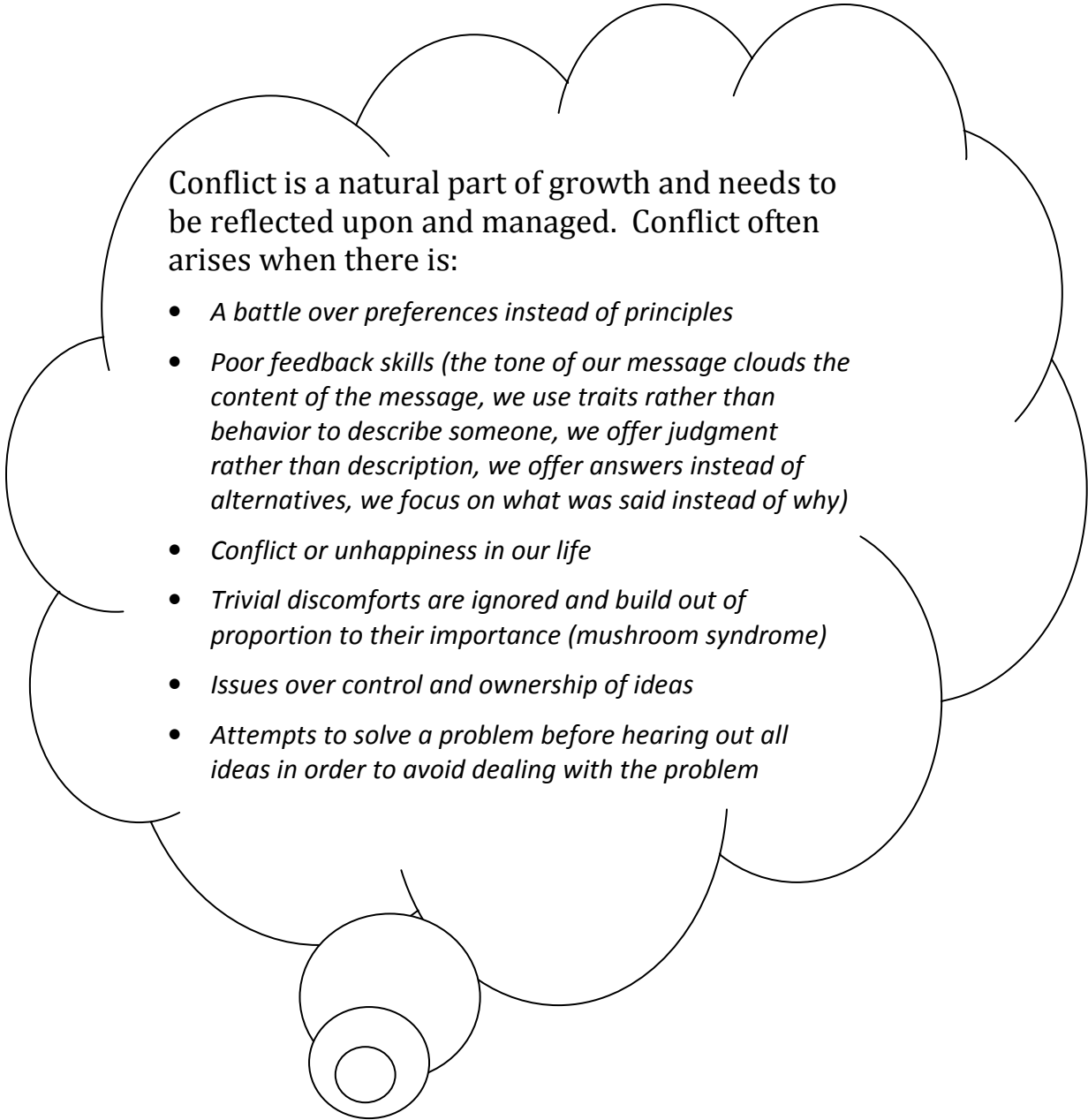
A by-product of increased organizational complexity, and sometimes of establishing a goal-oriented collaborative team, is conflict. Everyone will not always agree. However, collaborative teams are not competitive and there should be no winners and losers. Early in the formation of a team, members should discuss how they would deal with conflicting opinions in a productive manner and with respect for all viewpoints. If there is not enough team-building and empowerment, there will surely be conflict among the people who make up the organization.

In cases of disagreement, it is most important that opinions are heard and are treated with respect.. While it may not feel good, conflict allows the group to further define problem situations and find solutions. If there is no conflict, there is no resolution! The team can agree to disagree, but it is most important that the team be prepared to not take or express opinions in a personal way. Growth and organizational conflict must be reflected upon and managed. Establishing norms for dealing with conflict gives each member the way to bring differences out in the open and still feel safe.

Strategies to resolve conflicts are:

- ☹ **Confront the conflict:** express your views and your feelings about it when you have the time to also listen and invite the opposition to do the same. Be prepared to calmly state your position and be prepared to listen.
- ✎ **Jointly define the conflict/issue:** discuss the problem and try to come to some agreement about what the problem is -- and define it as a mutual problem to be solved, not one that will be won or lost. This is the time to be sure that statements are about the issue and do not become personal.
- ! **Share your feelings and try to take the other person's perspective:** continually try to express yourself and clarify your position, while you are also trying to understand what the opposition thinks and feels. Try to understand what the motivations are for yourself as well as the other person(s) and work to think of ways to resolve the conflict that allow for the other person to gain as well.
- ✓ **Reach an agreement:** all participants in the conflict need to be satisfied with the outcome of the discussion and agree to be committed to decisions made. Before closing the discussion, the members should agree on the position to be taken and how to check on the decision made in future meetings. The team should discuss how to review the agreement and how to improve cooperation in the future.

As a facilitator, your role is to help provide a safe environment where disagreement and conflict can surface and be put to use as a positive and creative force. Establishing ground rules and clarifying the expectations of the members at the beginning of the group process is one of the most important things a facilitator can do. It provides participants a clear sense of the boundaries of the group.



Conflict is a natural part of growth and needs to be reflected upon and managed. Conflict often arises when there is:

- *A battle over preferences instead of principles*
- *Poor feedback skills (the tone of our message clouds the content of the message, we use traits rather than behavior to describe someone, we offer judgment rather than description, we offer answers instead of alternatives, we focus on what was said instead of why)*
- *Conflict or unhappiness in our life*
- *Trivial discomforts are ignored and build out of proportion to their importance (mushroom syndrome)*
- *Issues over control and ownership of ideas*
- *Attempts to solve a problem before hearing out all ideas in order to avoid dealing with the problem*

**Something
to think
about....**

**Without conflict, there
is no resolution.**

COLLABORATIVE TEAM CHECKLIST

TEAMS

- share common beliefs and work toward common goals
- establish and share roles and responsibilities
- establish mutually agreed upon methods for meetings
- are willing to share personal feelings and insights
- continue to change and grow
- have fun!

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

- roles and responsibilities are clear
- lines of communication are clear
- expectations regarding work performance (quality, timeliness, etc.) are clear and equitable

TEAM MEETINGS

- meet regularly and consistently
- start meetings on time (members be on time)
- sit facing toward each other at meetings (in a circle)
- have an agenda (agreed upon in advance)
- begin with celebrations, sharing, or other positive note
- have a facilitator (regular or rotating) who effectively keep the discussion on track
- have a recorder take notes on discussions, decisions, and responsibilities for follow-up (distributed immediately after meeting)
- hold no one solely responsible for success/failure of team actions
- share group tasks, responsibilities and group leadership
- develop action plans, follow up on decisions, and monitor issues as part of the agenda of following meetings
- keep to scheduled time limits

INDIVIDUAL INTERACTIONS and RESPONSIBILITY

- demonstrate positive personal interactions
 - encourage each other to interact
 - contribute opinions, participate in problem-solving and decisions
 - support teammates by offering assistance
 - be honest

- openly communicate (and agree to disagree at times)
- demonstrate respect through facial expression, body posture and tone of voice
- ❑ engage in active listening
 - give eye contact to the speaker
 - don't interrupt the speaker
 - ask questions related to the discussion and when necessary, repeat or paraphrase the speaker to ensure understanding
- ❑ make decisions by consensus
 - poll each other for understanding and clarification of issues/ideas
 - be flexible when necessary and compromise to reach agreement on next steps
 - share decision making credit and blame (use "we" and "us" vs. "I" and "you")
- ❑ set rules for methods to deal with controversial issues or subjects
- ❑ complete assignments outside of meetings
- ❑ generate lots of potential solutions to an identified problem
- ❑ review how they are doing and give each other feedback on how they are doing as a team

CONFLICT RESOLUTION METHODS

- ❑ remain calm
- ❑ look at the speaker
- ❑ don't interrupt the speaker
- ❑ don't adopt a defensive posture
- ❑ listen to what is being said
- ❑ accept criticism of ideas without being defensive
- ❑ criticize ideas and not people
- ❑ don't talk about others behind their back
- ❑ check the accuracy of the message (don't assume)
- ❑ validate the other person's feelings
- ❑ try to imagine the other person's point of view
- ❑ use a tone of voice which is calming
- ❑ avoid tones which suggest impatience, disgust, or sarcasm
- ❑ speak clearly and slowly at a moderate volume
- ❑ attempt to reach agreement on a mutual goal and next steps
- ❑ plan to return to the issue with ground rules or with an agreed-upon agenda

MEETING NOTES

DATE: _____ MEETING: _____

PRESENT: _____

Facilitator: _____ Recorder: _____

| Minutes | Action to be taken | By when By whom |
|---------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | | |

NEXT MEETING PLANS

Date: _____ Time: _____ Location: _____

Facilitator: _____ Recorder: _____

Time Keeper: _____ Jargon Buster: _____

Snack Provider: _____ Observer: _____

AGENDA:

COMMENTS:

FUTURE MEETING DATES:

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