

Forming Group Commitments

Developed by Holli Hanson, Abeo School Change

Adapted from NSRF activity by Marylyn Wentworth.

Group commitments, or Norms, are important for a group that intends to work together over time and will be having meaningful, sometimes difficult, conversations. Starting with basic commitments builds trust, clarifies group expectations of one another, and establishes points of “reflection” to see how the group is doing regarding process. They may be added to, or condensed, as the group progresses.

Group Commitments can be seen in 2 categories: Behavioral Commitments, how we interact together and Operational Commitments, the mechanics of the meeting. Both of these are important to maintain healthy communication in the group. An example of a behavioral commitment might be, listen to understand. An operational commitment might be, we start and end on time and always have an agenda.

Activity

Approximately 35-40 minutes

Individual Written Reflection (5 min): Write about a time in which you were a part of a successful learning group (connected to school or not). *What made the experience a success? What conditions were present that supported your learning? How did the group work together? Were there tools or structures that the group utilized (either intentionally or unintentionally?)*

Discussion (10 min): Each person has approx. 2 min to share their story while the others listen. After all group members have shared, discuss what you heard. *What commonalities emerged across stories? What seems to be key in thinking about how you develop as a successful learning group?*

- Chart critical ideas that emerge

Establishing commitments (20 min):

1. Reflecting on the discussion and stories shared, each person writes down what they need as an individual in order to work productively in a group. An example might be "to have all voices heard," or "to start and end our meetings when we say we will." (share samples if helpful for group members). (3 min)
2. In pairs, each person shares the top 3-4 things they need in order to work productively. Discuss and try to combine and narrow if possible. In the discussing of what is needed, be clear on what that looks like in action. For example, "Treat one another with respect". What does that look like and sound like in action? There are many different ways to interpret the word "respect". (5 min)
3. Each pair shares with the group and then the group discusses commonalities, making clarifications and sharing what it looks like if this is occurring. Again, trying to narrow to a shorter list. Sometimes the subtle differences are significant to people, so it is important that everyone feel their needs have been honored before shortening the list. (10 min)

The narrowed list should be no more than 4-7 items. If the list is too long, group members will not be able to remember the commitments. You might even consider having a separate list of operational commitments.

4. Once a list is developed, in a go-around and make sure each person is comfortable with what is on the list and can articulate what it looks like in action. Ask if everyone can abide by the listed Commitments. If anyone dislikes or doesn't want to comply with one of them, the Commitment should be discussed and a decision should be made to keep it on the list with a notation of objection, to remove it, or to try it for a specified amount of time and check it again. (2-5 min)

Things to remember about Group Commitments:

- Some of the Group Commitments might be hard for the group to follow. Those Commitments should be highlighted and discussed. With time it will become clear

if it needs to be modified or should be dropped. Sometimes what might appear to be a difficult commitment turns out not to be hard at all. "Everyone has a turn to speak," is sometimes debated for example, with the argument that not everyone likes to talk every time an issue is raised, and others think aloud and only process well if they have the space to do that. Frequently, a system of checking in with everyone, without requiring everyone to speak, becomes a more effective commitment.

- The purpose of the Group Commitments is to support the group in building trust and allow all participants to feel as if they are contributing to the group's work. While engaging in the work, refer to the Group Commitments whenever they might help group process. If one person is dominating, for example, it is easier to refer to a Group Commitment that says, "take care with how often and how long you speak," than to ask someone directly to stop dominating the group.
- Check in on the Group Commitments when reflection is done on the group work or during the debrief. Note any that were not followed particularly well for attention in the next work session. Being sure they are followed, refining them, and adding or subtracting Group Commitments is important, as it makes for smoother work and more trust within the group.