The Seven Norms of Collaboration

Pausing: Pausing slows down the "to and fro" of discussion. It provides for "wait time," which has been shown to dramatically improve thinking. It signals to others that their ideas and comments are worth thinking about, dignifies their contributions, and implicitly encourages future participation. Pausing enhances discussion and greatly increases the quality of decision making.

Paraphrasing: To paraphrase is to recast into one's own words, to summarize, or to provide an example of what has just been said. It helps members of a team hear and understand each other as they evaluate data and formulate decisions, and it helps to reduce group tension by communicating the attempt to understand. Signal your intention to paraphrase ("So, you're suggesting…"), and choose a level for the paraphrase: (1) acknowledge and clarify; (2) summarize and organize; or (3) shift the focus to a higher or lower level.

Probing for specificity: Probing seeks to clarify something that is not yet fully understood. More information may be required or a term may need to be more fully defined. Clarifying questions can be either specific or open ended, depending upon the circumstances. Ask for clarification of vague nouns and pronouns (e.g., "they"), action words (e.g., "improve"), comparators (e.g., "best"), rules (e.g., "should"), and universal quantifiers (e.g., "everyone").

Putting ideas on the table and pulling them off: Ideas are the heart of a meaningful discussion. Members need to feel safe to put their ideas on the table for discussion. To have an idea be received in the spirit in which you offer it, label your intentions: "This is one idea…" or "Here's a thought…." The other half of this norm is equally important: knowing when an idea may be blocking dialogue or "derailing" the process and therefore should be taken off the table.

Paying attention to self and others: Collaborative work is facilitated when each team member is explicitly conscious of self and others—not only aware of what he or she is saying, but also how it is said and how others are responding to it. We need to be curious about other people's impressions and understandings but not judgmental. As we come to understand someone else's way of processing information, we are better able to communicate with them.

Presuming positive intentions: This is the assumption that other members of the team are acting from positive and constructive intentions, even if we disagree with their ideas. Presuming positive presuppositions is not a passive state; rather, it needs to become a regular part of one's verbal responses. The assumption of positive intentions is an aspect of the concept of a "loyal opposition," and it allows one member of a group to play "the devil's advocate." It builds trust, promotes healthy disagreement, and reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and emotional conflict.

Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry: Both advocacy and inquiry are necessary components of collaborative work. The intention of advocacy is to influence others' thinking; the intention of inquiry is to understand their thinking. Highly effective teams consciously attempt to balance these two components. Inquiry provides for greater understanding. Advocacy leads to decision making. Maintaining a balance between advocating for a position and inquiring about the positions held by others helps create a genuine learning community.