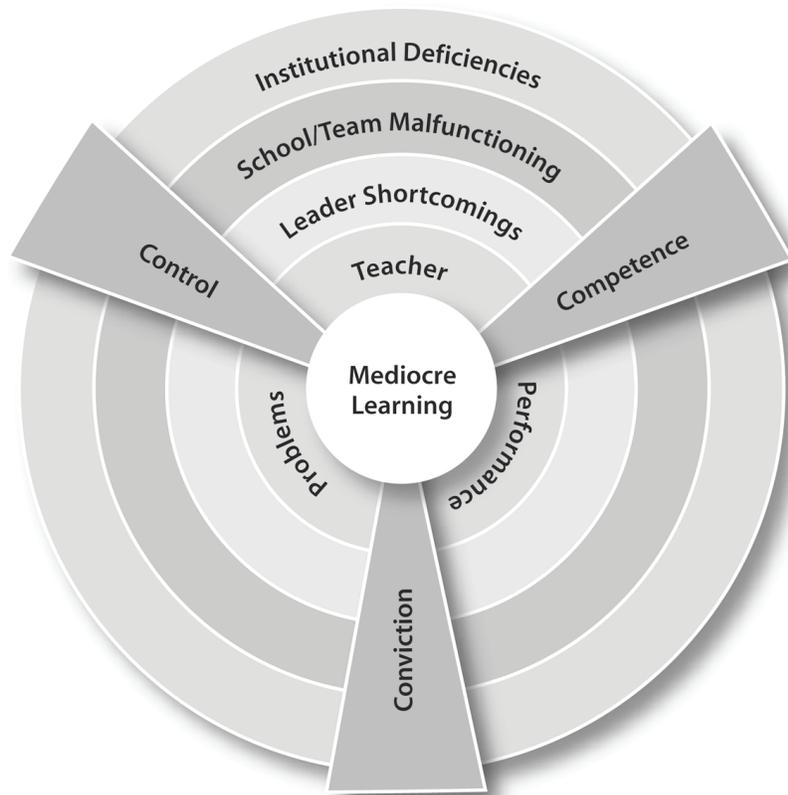


Norm Development Handbook

A Supplement to *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning* (2008)



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The Skillful Leader II is a three-day course based on the book *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning* (2008) by Alexander D. Platt, Caroline Tripp, Robert G. Fraser, James R. Warnock, and Rachel E. Curtis (Ready About Press). The course handouts are provided in conjunction with RBT professional development programs. They are not sold separately.



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Norm Development Handbook

Supplement to *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning (2008)*

Purpose

This handbook is for leaders who want to work with groups to develop norms that specify what members expect of one another and of their professional community or team as a whole.

Norms are rules, guidelines, or standards governing group interaction. Healthy and unhealthy communities, low-performing and high-performing teams all establish and enforce a code of norms (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). These rules and operating principles may be intentionally developed and transparent or they may be implicit and hidden. When operating as a positive force, norms define expected, not just ideal behavior. When norms are hidden or negative they may squelch innovation and encourage behavior that undermines group effectiveness and trust.

Types of Norms

Well-crafted norms build a sense of mutual respect and keep effort focused on the important work a team needs to accomplish rather than on distracting “side issues” and politics. Adoption and ownership of norms requires discussion of:

- What we can live by and live with
- How we will know if the value is present (indicators)
- What we will do if the value is absent or violated (accountability)

Consider the following examples:

- Members will practice asking probing questions prior to judging.
- We will focus of our work on openly examining our classroom practice and its impact on student learning.
- We will resolve to surface disagreements during our meetings, not in the halls.
- We will start and end on time.
- We will view gaps in student achievement as collective challenges, not as opportunities for individual blame.

Notice that the sample norms highlight different aspects of group interaction. Some emphasize **individual skills**, such as “asking probing questions.” Others focus on **group values**, like “we will resolve to surface disagreements,” and one lays out a **ground rule**: “We will start and end on time.”

Each type or category makes its own contribution to the success of the group. Too often discussion stops with a list of “live by’s.” Members fail to specify the behavior that will signal the values are present or the consequences if an expectation is unmet or a value violated.



The Process

Starting points for norm development depend on whether the group exists and has been together for some time or is just being formed. Leaders can often “read” the norms of existing groups through their behavior. It is important for members to acknowledge the hidden rules by which they live as well.

Step 1 for a group with history: Use the Survey of Practices That Signal Norms (see Handout 1). The data from completed surveys then become the basis for formulating a set of norms as described in Step 2 below.

Step 1 for a new group: Present 3-4 sample norm lists adopted by other groups (see Handout 4) and have participants categorize the types of norms (see Handout 2).

or

Present the three categories of norms (see Handout 2) and walk the group members through different examples (see Handout 4) until they report that they are comfortable with the distinctions and would be able to apply them.

Step 2: Ask team members to brainstorm norms. Consider focusing on operating norms first but spend more time on skills and values. We recommend that norm discussions be focused on the following cultural and skill categories (see Handouts 1 and 3):

- Nondefensive self-examination of teaching practices
- Agenda content and conversation focus
- Response to conflict
- Response to problems
- Collective action and agreements

Step 3: Using a rating or priority-setting process such as spend-a-dot*, select a starter set of norms to which participants are most committed and generate indicators (See Handout 3).

Step 4: Decide how you will assess adherence to norms. Include in discussion how individuals will receive feedback for norm violations. (*Note:* At least initially, assign someone the role of process observer. The process observer’s job is to give the group feedback on adherence to the norms at the end of the meeting. Once the group is working smoothly the process observer role can be dropped.)

*Each individual gets a set number of dots to spend on the items that s/he considers most important. Participants can choose to spread their dots over a number of items or cluster them to indicate strong preferences.



Handout 1: Survey of Practices That Signal Norms

We have found that an effective, comprehensive set of norms includes five different foundational categories. Rate your group's current practice on each of these categories as follows:

- 1 = Not a practice
- 2 = Random practice
- 3 = Regular practice
- NA = Not applicable/Don't know

Nondefensive self-examination of teaching practices (Saphier, 2005)

- _____ Group has identified and publicly posted norms of communication.
- _____ Members publicly discuss and examine instructional practices to determine how well they help students.
- _____ The group routinely evaluates how its members function together.

Agenda content and conversation focus

- _____ Content of meetings focuses on intervention strategies to improve student learning.
- _____ Focus of conversation is not on blaming students. Members ask how we as individuals and as a group can modify our practice to improve our instruction.
- _____ Agenda keeps a focus on monitoring: What is working? What needs revision?

Response to conflict

- _____ Group regards conflict about ideas and approaches as a necessary part of closing achievement gaps and developing common agreements.
- _____ Group understands the inherent tension when individual autonomy conflicts with collective decision-making and is able to come to a balance between collective agreements and individual choice.
- _____ Members know how to disagree respectfully.

Response to problems

- _____ Group has clear structures for identifying and solving problems.
- _____ Group focuses on problem identification and clarification before jumping to solutions.
- _____ Problems are seen as opportunities for change rather than blame.

Collective action and agreements

- _____ Group develops shared goals related to an instructional focus, monitors application in classrooms, and holds each other accountable for the implementation.
- _____ Members monitor implementation of common instructional/curriculum/assessment strategies.
- _____ Decisions show evidence of sacrificing individual autonomy for collective action.
- _____ Members model exposing classroom practice to public viewing through walks, team observations, and peer observations.



Handout 2: Types of Norms

Directions: Examine the three sets of norms below and notice the different qualities.

1. Some norms focus on **skills to be practiced** by individual participants.

Examples:

- We will model in our behavior what we expect from our students.
- No cross conversations.

2. Some norms focus on **values that should guide group interaction**.

Examples:

- Give feedback when individuals violate agreements.
- Base ILT decisions on data whenever possible.
- Include five or more meeting minutes for reflection on what went well and what can be improved.
- Cultivate diversity by consciously integrating....

3. Finally, norms can focus on **operating procedures** and logistical agreements.

Examples:

- Start meetings promptly and end on time.
- Use time efficiently.
- Put cell phones on vibrate.



Handout 3: Sample Norms by Recommended Categories

1. **Nondefensive self-examination of teaching practices.** To what degree do members routinely and openly examine the impact of their practices on student learning? (Saphier, 2005)

Sample norm: “We will focus of our work on openly examining our classroom practice and its impact on student learning.”

Indicators

- Work is focused on modifying our practice to improve our interventions with students.
- Members know what they do not know—and cannot do—yet.

2. **Agenda content and conversation focus.** Do the agenda (content and time allocations) and conversations focus mainly on teaching and learning?

Sample norm: “Our agendas and conversations will primarily focus on teaching and learning.”

Indicators

- Minimum number of war stories and tales of blame
- Focus on monitoring: What is working? What needs revision?
- Random selection of agendas show heavy weight of time to teaching and learning.

3. **Response to conflict.** How is disagreement between and among members viewed? How is it handled?

Sample norm: “We celebrate and welcome different viewpoints and commit to making our disagreements heard in the meeting, not in the halls.”

or

“We will work hard to analyze and understand perspectives which conflict with ours and will remain open to altering our positions. We will fight gracefully.”

Indicators

- Conflict and disagreement are evident, but focus is on issues, not personalities.
- Members accept and work through the inherent tension that arises when individual autonomy conflicts with collective decision-making.
- There is no post-meeting griping about decisions that went against an individual’s position.

4. **Response to problems.** What is the pattern of reactions to problems or challenges, especially those related to student achievement?

Sample norm: “We all assume responsibility for all of our students. We will view gaps in student achievement as collective challenges, not as opportunities for individual blame.”



Indicators

- Adoption of a formal problem-solving model.
- Focus on post-event-flop three-question analysis: What happened? Why did it happen? What can we learn from what we experienced? (Schlechty, 2001, citing Wheatly)

5. **Collective action and agreements.** How is individual autonomy balanced with responsibility for collective action?

Sample norm: “We agree to implement collective agreements even if it means sacrificing some individual autonomy.”

Indicators

- Evidence of classroom-level implementation of school initiative and leadership agreements.
- Members hold each other accountable for student learning and for establishing and implementing and monitoring common agreements.
- Evidence of developing common agreements, assessments, and policies.



Handout 4: Examples of Norms Developed by Teams

Example 1: Paul Revere Elementary School

We will:

- Participate in meetings respecting the ideas of others and taking responsibility for sharing concerns with the whole group so that conflict is healthy and productive—not divisive.
- Practice positive and solution-oriented communication at work.
- Model the behavior we expect from our students.
- Use time efficiently in meetings and table discussions to meet the needs of the group.
- Challenge ourselves and each other to honor our agreements. We agree to give new agreements a trial period before considering changes.
- Cultivate diversity by consciously integrating—along ethnic, gender, grade level, job classification and other groupings—at meetings and community events.

Example 2: Solomon Lewenburg Middle School Instructional Leadership Team

- Meeting Time: Start meeting promptly and end on time.
- Attendance: Be prepared to discuss the prepared agenda.
- Commitment: Actively participate in ILT meetings and complete tasks as per ILT minutes and/or the agreed upon ILT roles and responsibilities.
- Communication: Respect each other and different viewpoints and be the ILT liaison with cluster and other school teams and vice versa.
- Decision Making: Make instructional decisions by consensus.
- Use of Data: Base ILT decisions on data whenever possible.
- Confidentiality: Share information from ILT meeting with others in the school except if a team member asks that it be kept confidential.
- Meeting Evaluation: Include five or more meeting minutes for reflection on what went well and what can be improved.

Example 3: Edison Middle School Study Group

- Balance theory and practical application
- Set goals for next meeting
- Come prepared
- Communication
- Inform those who are absent
- Take initiative to ask if absent
- Everyone has something to offer
- Take responsibility to give and take
- No cross conversations
- Reflection and evaluation of each session
- Start time 5 minutes after period

