Energize Your Meetings!

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Holding professional meetings at school is one of the most important ways to support staff in raising the quality of their instruction. School and district leaders across the nation work hard to guide staff through productive meetings, with meaningful content and the lively exchange of ideas.

Sometimes, though, our adult meetings fall short of being fully engaging and productive, becoming something to be tolerated rather than welcomed. The familiar lecture-style meeting, where the goal is to "get the information out and get it out quickly," can leave participants feeling disengaged and facilitators weary. How much learning occurs is an open question.

Just as our students need active and interactive classroom environments to do their best learning, so, too, do adults. They need to be actively engaged with their discussion leader, with one another, and with the content being covered. They need an environment that promotes risk-taking and honest, respectful dialogue.

In your hands, you hold a key resource that will help you make professional development (PD) sessions and staff meetings come alive with learning. From interesting ways to discuss an article to efficient techniques for airing opinions on an issue, the easy-to-use interactive structures in this book will get participants fully engaged. The result: more meaningful and productive gatherings, no matter the purpose or size of your group.

Already experienced at facilitating interactive meetings? You'll find plenty of ideas to add to your repertoire. Just beginning? This guide will get you off to a great start.

Tried and True

For more than three decades, facilitators of *Responsive Classroom*® workshops have been using these interactive structures to fully engage adult participants. Some structures were adapted from ones used successfully with children in the classroom; others were devised just for adults. Regardless, they have always been an essential element of *Responsive Classroom* workshops—and critical to their success.

These ideas for interactive learning allow professionals to engage with one another in dynamic but nonthreatening ways. Some structures, such as partners sharing thoughts on a question the group leader poses, are very simple. Others, such as small groups using a step-by-step approach to analyze possible solutions to a shared problem, are more involved. But every idea in this book will enable participants to work together effectively and strengthen their group intelligence while also building their individual knowledge.

Meeting a Wide Range of Goals

The thirty-five interactive learning structures in this book can help you reach a variety of meeting goals. For example, they can help your staff in:

➤ **Learning something new.** Suppose you're introducing a new way to teach a skill to students. You could open the meeting by using Mix and Mingle (page 34) to allow teachers to share with a series of partners what they already know about teaching this skill.

➤ **Deepening understanding of a topic.** When your team needs to go deeper with a topic, you can use Circle Map (page 14) to guide them in brainstorming ideas about the topic and then graphically categorizing and making sense of them.

➤ **Reflecting on learning and developing action steps.** If this is your goal, you could try Walk Around Survey (page 72) to help participants share key takeaways and ensure that everyone leaves the meeting with the same understanding.

➤ **Fully knowing procedures or protocols.** If you simply need to communicate information, such as new safety protocols, you can use Step-by-Step (page 60) to do so clearly yet interactively.

➤ **Solving a problem collaboratively.** Sometimes you need to bring a group together to discuss how to address a thorny issue, such as misbehavior in the cafeteria. Using a structure such as Narrowing Choices (page 38) ensures that all voices are heard, which can help the group better understand the problem and efficiently find a solution to try.

Besides thinking about your purpose for the meeting or PD session, consider your comfort level with using a particular structure, your knowledge of the group members, and their comfort level with trying new approaches to collaborative discussions and problem-solving.

Browse through the Learning Structures at a Glance (pages 6–7) to find ideas to try. You might want to start with a fairly straightforward one, such as Mix and Mingle (page 34) or Think, Pair, Share (page 64). Then, try another one for variety and to ensure that your sessions remain lively and your audience fully engaged.

THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE

Right after participants get started with their discussions in pairs or small groups, it's helpful if you make a quick tour around the room to assess whether everyone understood your directions and is getting to the task at hand. This way, you can clarify directions right away and, if needed, stop the whole group and clarify things for everyone.

Also, when circulating, try to be a "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." Listen in, nod, clarify misunderstandings, and gently redirect a group if it's off task, but avoid hovering too long or steering a conversation.

Of course, you may decide that it's important for you to participate directly, by talking one-on-one with a partner or as part of a small group. If so, still do the initial "drive-by" of all groups to make sure everyone is on track.

Tips for Success

➤ **Give clear instructions.** Summarize steps concisely or model them quickly. You could additionally show the steps on a chart. Alternatively, give out one step and have participants complete it before telling them the next step.

➤ **Point out potential challenges ahead of time.** For example, in Say Something (page 52), participants may be tempted to have a lengthy discussion about a point, rather than saying just one thing. Acknowledging such challenges up front can help participants anticipate them and stay on track.

➤ **Establish time limits.** You can project a visual timer from your computer to a screen (free timer apps are available) or simply give 1- or 5-minute warnings. This helps participants better manage their time and keeps the meeting moving along.

➤ **Avoid combining too many structures in one meeting.** It's helpful to have variety from meeting to meeting. But using many structures in one meeting can lead participants to focus on learning new structures instead of taking in the meeting content.

➤ **Have supplies ready.** Be sure pens, pencils, markers, paper, and handouts are ready to go. You may also want to have extra handouts available for unexpected participants.

➤ **Teach and use a signal for quiet attention.** Instead of repeatedly calling out "Time's up" or "Can I have your attention?" use a simple signal such as raising your hand or ringing a chime. Give the signal and then wait until everyone has stopped and focused on you.

➤ **Use quick, simple ways to form groups.** Counting off, grouping by grade level, or signing up on a chart can all work. You may also want to assign groups or pairs in advance to ensure participants work with a variety of people. In general, four to five people is the ideal size for a small group.

➤ **Set up a chart for burning questions.** To manage questions, write them on a chart as they come up (or have participants do this on their own). Address questions at the end of the meeting, save them for a later meeting, or send out a follow-up email with the questions and answers.

➤ **Give everyone a chance to speak.** The structures in this book provide opportunities for everyone to be heard, but one or more people can still sometimes dominate. Keep discussions inclusive by, for example, setting time limits for each speaker or limiting sharing to one comment per person. State explicitly that cross-talking or side conversations need to wait until everyone has had a chance to be heard.

Text Rendering — Introduction

As you read the Energize Your Meetings introduction, take notes on the following to help you prepare for a group discussion:

A sentence I want to remember:

_____

_____

A phrase that surprised or interested me:

_____

A meaningful word to remember:

_____

Questions and wonderings:

- _____
- _____

Ideas from group conversation to keep in mind:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Geometric Forms

☐ Something I learned that "squares" with my thinking
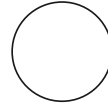
◯ A question that is still "circling" in my mind

△ Three important "points" I want to remember

1)

2)

3)

⇒ One new "direction" I will go in (or action I will take)

Learning Structure Exploration and Idea Creation

Learning Structure name: _____

Topic Ideas:

- _____

- _____

- _____

Learning Structure name: _____

Topic Ideas:

- _____

- _____

- _____

Learning Structure name: _____

Topic Ideas:

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