

# SNA *plus*

INSPIRES

INFORMS

INSTRUCTS

K-12 FOODSERVICE

## Collaborate to Innovate

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD



Brought to you by SNA with the generous support of General Mills Foodservice

In adopting positive behavioral norms, you and your team can build a culture of collaboration.



There's no shortage of problems to solve in the wonderful world of school nutrition. This has always been a tricky foodservice segment, of course, forever contending with challenges that range from complex regulations to chronic disrespect. But every year brings brand-new tests and trials, which means creative problem-solving has become a business necessity. Most experts agree that when it comes to brainstorming, identifying and implementing new solutions, “two (or more) heads are better than one.” But without a thoughtful process for managing group dynamics, you might wind up with a “too-many cooks-spoil-the-soup” scenario.

To this end, authorities in the business of helping teams to work effectively have developed various models designed to foster collaboration. An internet search will bring up the three dimensions of collaboration, the four models of collaboration, the five levels of collaboration, the six C's of leadership and others.

But one of these approaches, the **Seven Norms of Collaboration**, has been used extensively by school district administrators for more than 20 years, after being established and shared in the 1998 publication of *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*, by Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman. This facilitation approach has proven so effective and enduring that a third edition

was published in 2016, and the authors have gone on to develop numerous related training seminars, toolkits and other resources produced and distributed by Thinking Collaborative, LLC ([www.thinkingcollaborative.com/as-resources](http://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/as-resources)).








This pragmatic approach leans hard on common sense principles—it's built right into use of the word “norms.” Definitions of “norms” vary, but all speak to expected standards of behavior in different groups. A norm is an action or behavior that most of us “normally” can expect within the dynamics of a particular group—but acceptable norms might be quite diverse, depending on the group. Trainer Amy Climer, PhD, ([www.climerconsulting.com](http://www.climerconsulting.com)) identifies sarcasm as a good example, explaining that there are



*Highly collaborative and successful teams exhibit several common norms of behavior that regularly lead to effective meetings.*

some groups of people—such as family or friends—where use of sarcasm is very normal. Group members may tend to tease each other a lot, having fun with sarcastic comments. But there are other groups where sarcasm is neither welcome nor appropriate; it's simply not the culture of that group.

Many norms arise naturally over time based on the way a particular group interacts with one another. But norms also can be developed intentionally. Following extensive research, Garmston and Wellman found that highly collaborative and successful teams exhibited several common norms of behavior that regularly lead to effective meetings and innovative initiatives. These became the Seven Norms of Collaboration that the pair promotes to school districts and other organizations:

-  Pausing
-  Paraphrasing
-  Posing Questions (aka Probing)
-  Putting Ideas on the Table
-  Providing Data
-  Paying Attention to Self and Others
-  Presuming Positive Intentions

Together, these seven norms are built on a singular foundation: They are all about *promoting a spirit of inquiry*.

Leaders can inform all members of a particular group that they are expected to follow these seven norms of behavior in

meetings and various interactions. By identifying the norms, setting the expectation among the group and enforcing practice of the principles, leaders can create an environment that is primed to produce results. The Seven Norms can be applied in any type of meeting, from a two-day strategic planning retreat to a monthly managers meeting to a weekly staff meeting with your team. In this article, we'll dive into each of the seven norms and imagine how they might be applied in a school nutrition setting.

## 1. Pausing

Extroverts, pay close attention. Pausing before responding is a *good* thing. It allows time to think, to process information and then to reflect. Slowing down to listen and weighing the thoughts of others before sharing your own establishes more productive dialogue. As a group leader, you may need to remind participants (especially those extroverts) to resist a tendency to think aloud and to fight the temptation to identify a quick solution to the problem.

Let's say you've asked your five-member cafeteria team to brainstorm a more efficient process for managing the dual tasks of kitchen clean-up and prep for the next day's breakfast. At present, both tasks are tackled after the last lunch period,

*Welcome data. Data can help paint a picture, confirm a problem, identify opportunities, affirm a solution.*



and it feels chaotic and unbalanced, with some staff members clocking out well before others, as each completes their individual responsibilities.

Once the question is barely out of your mouth, Daniela, an early bird, suggests that breakfast prep be handled in the morning, establishing an earlier daily start time, and recommending that *everyone* share in the kitchen clean-up (even cashiers), so they can all leave soon after lunch is over. Multiple nodding heads signal general agreement with this suggestion, so Jason, feeling intimidated about coming across as an idea killer, remains silent and doesn't point out how certain items on the cycle menu require earlier and longer prep. And after initially agreeing, Morgan belatedly realizes that a morning schedule change will complicate getting her middle-schooler out of bed and onto the bus on time.

Both Jason and Morgan bring their concerns to you *after* the meeting has concluded, and you realize you'll have to bring the team back together all over again at a later date to readdress the question and come up with a different solution.

You might get a better result by asking everyone to pause and consider the question silently for a few minutes, then calling on members one at a time to share their suggestions—and their questions. This would set up an environment for a collaborative dialogue. Garmston and

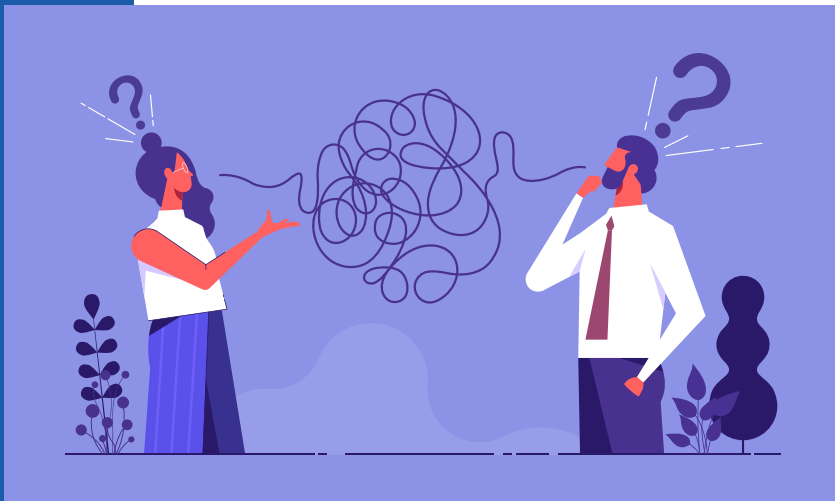
Wellman recommend pausing after asking questions, after group members respond, before your own questions or responses and collectively, for note-taking and reflection.

## 2. Paraphrasing

This is a key tactic in active listening. Paraphrasing what someone else has said promotes clarity and understanding. This is different than parroting, notes Climer. Verbatim repetition doesn't move things forward. Instead, you can use an "acknowledge and clarify" approach. ("It sounds like you're suggesting that... Did I get that right?") Or you might wait until several people have shared and then "summarize and organize" what has been shared. ("So, I'm hearing that there are two basic directions that we could take.")

Keeping with our cafeteria example, paraphrasing can help you, as a leader, listen to and identify what's behind some of the suggestions. You can paraphrase the various comments made about Daniela's idea as a means of determining how important it is to the entire group to have more time in the afternoon to run errands, accommodate another part-time job or get to doctor appointments. Or maybe that's not a priority for anyone except Daniela. Paraphrasing as *you* listen—and encouraging others to do so as *they* listen—will improve the quality of the discussion.





*Posing questions is a natural outgrowth of paraphrasing and is an opportunity to explore an issue more thoughtfully and completely.*

### 3. Posing Questions

Some published variations of the Seven Norms call this one “Probing,” but that word can have a negative connotation. Posing questions is a natural outgrowth of paraphrasing and is an opportunity to explore an issue more thoughtfully and completely. The questions can be highly specific. (“Can you give some details about the parent complaint?”) Or they might be somewhat general. (“I’d love to hear more of your thinking here. Would you mind expanding?”) Questions—and answers—create dialogue, and that’s at the heart of collaboration. The process also leads to greater specificity and clarity. All team members should be encouraged to engage in posing questions—to you and to one another.

Garmston and Wellman caution against “leading” questions—especially those driven by a personal agenda—as well as suggestions that are disguised as questions. Instead, focus on queries that invite thinking and exploration, addressing presumptions, perceptions and interpretations, plus those that aim to build understanding.

Let’s say you are leading a monthly meeting of all the site managers. Supply shortages continue to be a problem across the district, but they have varying effects from site to site. You start by asking questions about the most frustrating

problems managers encounter. One school seems to get shorted more often than another. One site has easily adjusted to menu pivots, while another site struggles and frequently runs out of food. The same three sites are always the first stops on the delivery route and usually get their full orders. Two sites have excellent cooks on staff who regularly turn pantry items into menu gold. Three sites are chronically understaffed.

Posing questions is important to help identify what’s working and what’s not, but you want to be sure the discussion stays focused *there* and doesn’t devolve into a competitive who-has-it-worst vent fest. The questions and their answers will help the group to identify priorities and best practices that could lead to workable solutions.

### 4. Putting Ideas on the Table

Getting *everyone’s* ideas is at the heart of the collaborative process, and it’s important that the group feels welcomed and encouraged to follow this norm; if the group is shy, you may need to start by soliciting ideas from individual participants. As a leader, you set the tone: There are no “bad” ideas, and you don’t need to fully evaluate one idea before inviting and hearing another suggestion. Remind everyone (and yourself) to always keep an open mind.



*School nutrition is a highly collaborative profession, with little competition to contend with and a shared mission that is a powerful driver. It's important to be intentional in tapping that inherent characteristic.*

Allow ideas to bubble up organically when they happen. Yes, you may be in the middle of dissecting the facets of a particular problem. If you don't want the idea to become a distraction to *that* activity, set up a process that invites participants to write their idea on a whiteboard (or, at the very least, on notepads you supply) whenever inspiration strikes.

Take a few minutes at the top of the discussion to request the group avoid “idea-killing” negative responses. (Check out *SN*'s article on this topic, “Perfect Pitch,” in the January/February 2023 issue: [www.tinyurl.com/Perfect-Pitch-SNmag](http://www.tinyurl.com/Perfect-Pitch-SNmag).) Use questions to fine tune the pros and cons, allowing these to direct consensus as to whether one suggested solution has greater potential for success than another. It's also important to “transfer ownership,” so to speak, of the idea from an individual to the group. While it's understandable if someone wants (and deserves) “credit” for a successful idea, this doesn't serve a collaborative spirit. Depersonalizing the idea also makes it less vulnerable to subjective and unreasonable responses. (“Ahmed is always so pompous. I don't care how good his idea is, I'm not supporting it.”)

A complex problem like addressing supply disruptions across the school district is not going to be resolved in one group meeting. It may be that you decide to take the input from all of the managers and feed

that information to a smaller staff task force to drill down into new courses of action. But by encouraging ideas from the larger group, you are demonstrating your commitment to collaboration and your understanding of its value in problem-solving and innovation. By practicing these norms alongside your team, you are creating a solutions-oriented workplace culture.

## 5. Providing Data

These norms are not intended to be followed consecutively, in a series, as this one would probably be most appropriate to apply *before* ideas start to flow. But the point is to welcome data—both qualitative and quantitative—as part of the collaborative process. Data can help paint a picture, confirm a problem, identify opportunities, affirm a solution. Data-driven decisions also tend to gain greater support among key stakeholders and those whose authority is needed to move innovation forward.

In our hypothetical supply chain discussion, data could be especially helpful in supporting solutions that have a “price tag” attached, such as hiring more delivery drivers, building a central warehouse, outfitting individual sites with outdoor freezer units and so on. But data also is important to gain consensus for any kind of change that might meet resistance just because it's new and different.





## 6. Paying Attention to Self and Others

This norm is essential in creating a safe space for people to feel welcome and valued in a collaborative pursuit. This is about word choice, tone and inflection, as well as facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal communication cues (aka body language). Climer cautions against allowing yourself to become paranoid while leading or participating in a meeting and instead, take a little time afterward for reflection and honest self-assessment. Think back not only on your own behaviors, but on how others responded to you. (Were you a little abrupt when Parvati shared the success of her “manager’s special” menu approach for the third time? Come to think of it, she didn’t say another word for the rest of the meeting.) This type of reflection will help you be more aware of unhelpful behaviors next time.

In addition to building your own self-awareness, you should review this norm frequently with members of your team. Without calling anyone out on interruptions, eye-rolling, sarcasm and the like, it can be helpful to periodically point out how such behaviors compromise the power of collaboration.

## 7. Presuming Positive Intentions

Any group is going to be influenced by the interpersonal dynamics of its participants and their relationships with one another. We like and respect certain people in the group,

but others tend to push our buttons. We might be jealous of some or insecure around others. It’s important to acknowledge these realities but not let them have undue influence in our collaborative efforts.

For this norm, we need to look at disagreements without judgment or negative interpretation. We need to start with and maintain a belief that the intentions of the other people in the group are positive. In addition to self-reminders, we can do this in respectful dialogue designed to keep things from getting heated or prompting others to shut down. (“I appreciate what you’re saying...,” “I understand that your circumstances lead you to view the situation in this way, however...” or, simply, “I think it’s best at this point that we agree to disagree.”) It’s also important to recognize any disconnects when the impact of the behavior doesn’t match the intent. As appropriate, pause, acknowledge and apologize.

## Together, We Rise

In general, school nutrition is a highly collaborative profession, with little competition to contend with and a shared mission that is a powerful driver. It’s important to be intentional in tapping that inherent characteristic. When so many days are consumed with putting out unexpected fires, school nutrition leaders can (and should) make use of regular group meetings to address problem-solving and pursue leading-edge innovation. Creating a culture of collaboration sets the table. **SN+**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of SN. This article was inspired by “Better Together: Rockstar Staff Meetings,” a presentation at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Minnesota School Nutrition Association by Imina Oftedahl, Director of Curriculum and Assessment at Burnsville-Eagan-Savage (Minn.) Independent School District 191.*

NOURISH

KIDS for

WHAT'S NEXT &

# BRING ON BREAKFAST



TRUSTED BRANDS  
KIDS LOVE

From the cafeteria to the classroom and no-prep to from-scratch, General Mills Foodservice is your go-to for breakfast solutions that fit any operational needs.



EXPLORE K-12 PRODUCTS, RESOURCES, AND MORE!