



# The Power of

*Setting and sticking to norms can transform team dynamics.*

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Improving education to meet the needs of *all* students requires that we deliberately engage the voices of *all* educators. In our experience working with schools and school systems around the world, we have found that norms can play a powerful role in eliciting the breadth of perspectives that is needed for a group of educators to tackle hard problems. And, along the way, teams that lean into norms often find that they ratchet up the “joy factor” of their collaborative work.

Norms are shared agreements about how a group will work together. They help us answer questions like: How will we treat one another? How will we engage with challenging content? What will we do if we disagree? Without having an explicit conversation about these questions, collaborative work tends to



# TEAM NORMS

reinforce inequitable patterns that exist within an organization or society. People with less positional power than others in the room may be hesitant to speak up. People from identity groups whose voices have historically been privileged may dominate conversations. As educators, we have the power to work toward a “new normal” on our teams. But it requires intentional effort to make this happen.

## Setting and Clarifying Norms

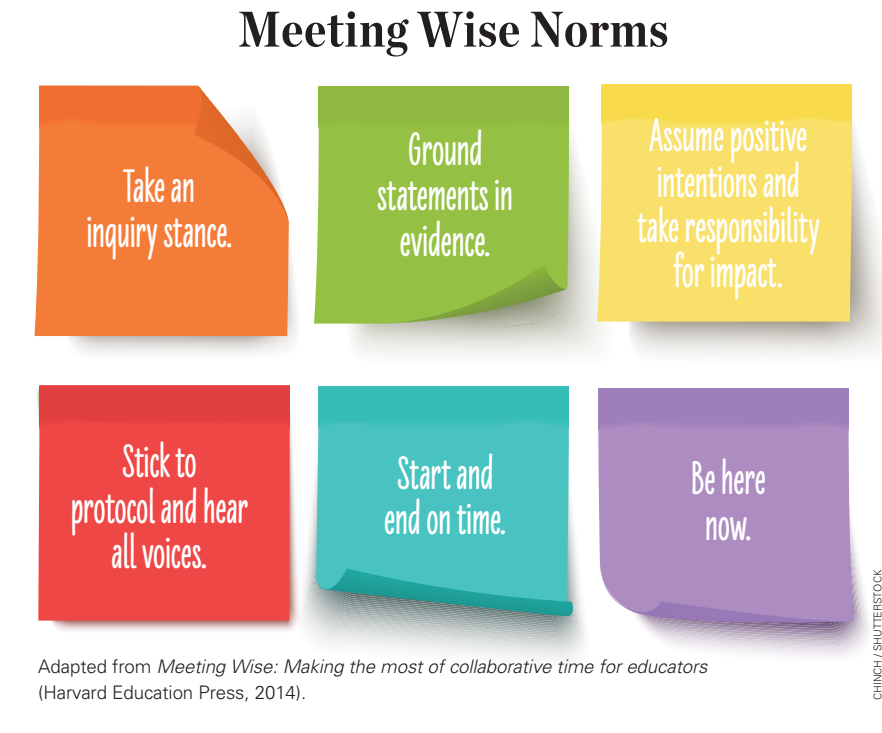
Groups approach setting norms in different ways. Some start with a blank slate and brainstorm norms together. In other cases, the facilitator may propose a set of norms that are particularly useful for fostering equitable collaboration. If the team will be exploring how issues of race, diversity, inclusion, and equity play out within their school or system, it is especially important to consider a set of norms that will make that conversation productive.<sup>1</sup>

In our work guiding teams doing collaborative data inquiry, we often open by sharing the norms adapted from *Meeting Wise*:

*Making the Most of Collaborative Time for Educators* (Harvard Education Press, 2014). Although these norms were originally developed to support school-based teams as they work through the Data Wise Improvement Process, we have found that they can be useful in a variety of settings, from teacher team meetings to central office workshops to faculty meetings at colleges and universities. As a general rule, limiting the number of norms to 5–7 makes it easier for teams to keep them in mind. Longer lists can send the message that *everything* is a priority, which of course means that nothing is.

Once a set of norms has been proposed, it is essential to provide time for the team to come to a shared understanding of what each norm really means. What would it look like and sound like if a particular norm were being followed? For example, the group might agree that *taking an inquiry stance* would involve asking questions from a place of genuine curiosity, not of judgment. The goal of questions is to clarify what teammates are saying. If group members know that their colleagues will take an inquiry stance, then they are more likely to trust that their perspective and insights will be understood.

When *ground statements in evidence* is first introduced as a potential norm, we have sometimes seen educators express concern that this means the group would only welcome statements that could be backed by formal research or hard numbers. But when discussing this norm, we encourage groups to hash out what they mean by “evidence.” It can feel much more authentic to define evidence to include specific and descriptive statements from team members’ own



lived experiences or their observations of their students. Sharing rich stories about classroom experiences can be an essential step in dismantling inequitable practices in schools.

Once a draft set of norms is in place, it is time to ask: Are there any norms in this list that we can’t live with? and Do we need to adjust any norms to make them more useful? Personally, we have learned so much by asking teams these questions. For example, initially the third Meeting Wise norm was simply *assume positive intentions*. We explained to school teams that if someone said something that “rubbed them the wrong way,” the listener should assume that the statement was coming from a good place, rooted in a shared desire to do the best by all children, and perhaps then take an inquiry stance to better understand what was said.

However, as educators discussed this norm, they told us that it could be exhausting to assume positive intentions when their colleagues spoke or acted in ways that were insensitive or hurtful. To have meaningful conversations, people needed assurance that if they were negatively affected by someone, they could say so and know that the speaker would be willing to own that impact. This adjustment became so prevalent that we revised the norm to be *assume positive intentions and take responsibility for impact*, and we now make it clear that everyone in the group is expected to act on feedback about how their statements are being received. Teams that agree to this norm commit to maintaining a growth mindset, meaning they give individuals an opportunity to address their blind spots and they resolve, as a team, to learn their way into

working together more effectively.

When discussing a draft set of norms with large teams, we often allow time for people to turn to the person next to them and check in about how they feel about the list. Making time for one-on-one discussion of norms can ensure that everyone has a chance to explore concerns they may have before sharing with the broader group. When it is time for group discussion, the goal is to get to a place where people feel comfortable enough that they are willing to “play along” with the list for a few meetings.

### Upholding Norms

The initial norms conversation is not over until the group has discussed what they will do if a norm is not being followed. Some teams have a lot of fun at this point, doing short role-plays where they deliberately violate a norm and test out different ways of addressing it. For example, someone could start checking email on their phone and the group could test-drive a few ways of reminding one another about the norm to *be here now*. Using humor in a low-stakes situation can help a group come up with playful ways to hold themselves accountable when it really matters. We’ve seen people agree to raise an eyebrow, tap their chin, or even hum when they feel a norm is being broken. It may be silly, but these types of agreed-upon gestures can get the job done: They provide a way for the group to hold itself to its shared promises.

Generally, though, the simplest, most straightforward way to uphold norms is for team members to speak up if they see a norm being violated. Reminding a colleague about a norm can feel uncomfortable, which is why it is so helpful to practice doing so as part of the norms-setting

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process. It will be easier to uphold norms during a real meeting if team members rehearse saying statements like, “I’ve noticed that we’ve been hearing from about half of the team during this discussion, and keeping in mind our norm of *hearing all voices*, I’m wondering if we might open up space for others to contribute.” And let’s face it: There is a very real power dynamic at play if a teacher is thinking about pointing out that his principal is breaking the *start and end on time* norm by showing up to a meeting 10 minutes late. It is critical to agree ahead of time how the group as a whole will uphold the high standards they have set for themselves. If calling out someone in the moment feels like too much of a stretch, appoint a team member to serve as the “norms checker” for each meeting. This can take the pressure off individuals to decide how and when to point out norm violations.

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### Keeping Norms Alive

In order for norms to make a difference in how a team works together, the team needs to revisit its norms continually. In fact, while it's important for a group to agree on norms when the team first forms, norms are most useful once the group is far enough along in its work for the “honeymoon” stage to have ended and disagreements to arise. If we don't keep our norms alive, they will be of no use to us when we get to this point.

To ensure that norms are top of mind, some teams display them on a table tent during each meeting. Others print their norms in the header or footer of their meeting agenda so they are available for easy reference. When we are working with a group, we periodically include a “norms check-in” as an agenda item. During this time, team members can rate themselves on how well they think they are following each norm and choose a norm to focus on for the remainder of the meeting. It can be useful for team members to share their thinking with a partner or with the whole group. We'll often hear a team member say, “Please, everyone, remind me if I'm not taking an inquiry stance—I know that one is so easy for me to forget!”

Especially in a larger group, it can be useful to gather and discuss evidence on how well the group thinks each norm is being followed. For example, a quick survey about norms might reveal that half the group thinks that the norm *be here now* is being followed “almost never,” while half the group thinks

it's being followed “all of the time.” Identifying that kind of discrepancy in perception can lead to a useful discussion about what that norm looks like, because the data suggest that group members are thinking about it differently. Revisiting norms frequently helps people monitor their participation in meetings and develop common language to discuss how the group works together. A simpler way of collecting data is to have the “norms checker” gather and share evidence on how well norms are being followed. For example, this person could be charged with reporting back to the group about the number of people who arrived on time to a meeting or the number of times each person spoke. When the norms checker shares the data at the end of the meeting, it will be understood that they are not being “negative”; they are just doing their job.

One of the most effective tools we have found for keeping norms alive in a group is the *plus/delta protocol*. This is a simple method that takes about five minutes at the end of a meeting and gets everyone involved. The group is asked to identify “pluses,” things that worked well in the meeting, and “deltas,” things to change for next time to improve how the group works together (the Greek letter delta is also a symbol for *change*). This dedicated time for reflection is the perfect opportunity to consider which norms are being followed, to the benefit of the group, and which might need more attention.

Then, at the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator presents a summary of the plus/delta feedback from the prior meeting and explains how the feedback was taken into account while planning the current meeting. For example, if a delta is that the group struggled with the norm to *hear all voices*, the facilitator might explain how they will be using a discussion protocol designed to address this. Instead of problem solving through open discussion, for instance, they might start by having everyone silently write ideas for addressing a challenge on sticky notes and then work together to sort the ideas and discuss interconnections. When team members see facilitators making changes as a result of deltas,

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- › How could norms, implemented intentionally, guide the work of a school or district team you're on?
- › Which of the Meeting Wise norms would be most applicable to your team? Are any noticeably missing in your team's work?
- › Based on what you read, how could your team respectfully “norm check” one another to ensure accountability?



it's amazing how substantive and constructive their feedback can become.

### **Leaning into Joy**

When norms that support equitable participation come alive, people start to feel like they can bring their full authentic selves to their team's work. They can spend less time silently fuming and more time laughing out loud at how many reminders everyone needs to live up to the expectations for inclusive teamwork that they have set for themselves.

Trying to improve education is emotional work because the problems we are trying to solve are so difficult. If there were straightforward solutions to problems, we would have found them already. We will only make meaningful improvements in teaching and learning for *all* students if we bring in everyone's perspectives and hear voices that historically have been less audible, even silenced.

At first we may discover that our colleagues have different assumptions about how a meeting should run and what it means to function as a team. That's why it's so important to bring tacit assumptions to the surface and come to a shared understanding of what it will look like to work together effectively to help all students thrive. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>For example, Darnisa Amante's [Disruptive Equity Education Project](#) and Glenn Singleton's [Courageous Conversation protocol](#) involve having people make explicit agreements about how they will engage in conversations about race.

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