

Agenda-Building Using Infinitives

Facilitative leaders create collaborative experiences where participants learn with and from each other. These “meetings that matter” do not simply happen – they are crafted with care. A Georgia school district developed a methodology that kept leaders engaged in the most meaningful work without adding meetings or elongating the already-scheduled meetings. They built their agenda using infinitives.

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Excerpt:

School systems consistently limit meetings for principals and other school-based leaders to assure that they can meet the safety and instructional needs of the students, employees, and families they serve at their school sites. In order to create space and time for this important learning, district instructional leadership re-conceptualized their monthly meeting time with school principals. A monthly multiple-hour meeting was shortened using structures that helped create focused, prioritized agendas. Albeit a simple strategy, the idea of consolidating informational items not only created time efficiency; it also modeled a very replicable practice for school leaders. The use of infinitives to categorize agendas such as the following authentic agenda from March 14, 2012:

1. To Inform
2. To Build Consensus
 - a. Will all teaching staff gather on their first day back to work? If so, what content does each staff member need to hear and from whom?
3. To Give Feedback
 - a. Draft Intervention Teacher job description from small workgroup
 - b. Draft professional learning initiatives from the new Strategic Plan
4. To Learn
 - a. Mandatory state student assessment testing for Kindergarten – grade 8 principals

In “To Inform,” each principal was provided a paper copy (or could access online) of each item on an agenda crafted by district instructional leaders. These items should not generate extensive conversation or questions – enough must be written to provide clear direction and due dates. “To inform” items were defined as “one-way communication.” Generally 6-10 minutes is given in each meeting to read the “To Inform” document, followed by 3-5 minutes of clarifying questions, defined as the “who, what, when, or where” – definitely not the “why.” The “To Inform” item was a radical departure from previous practices where already-communicated items were “reviewed” and “gone over.”

Notes about this practice:

1. Nothing gets on the agenda without purpose. No infinitive = no reason to include. These agendas are characterized by fewer, more thoughtful items, all of which require interaction of the participants.
2. Infinitive categories could change from meeting to meeting, dependent on the content and outcomes for the meeting. “To inform” generally sat on each agenda. Infinitives ranged in length from short to long. Two-word infinitives were common,

- such as “To learn”, as well as longer, more specific infinitives, such as, “To examine data and build action plans.”
3. “To inform” needed to be monitored. “May I make an announcement?” wasn’t permitted at the meeting if the announcement should have been included in the “To inform” document. Additionally, principals held district office leaders to their commitment about using “to inform” – if emails were sent that didn’t have immediate action required, that means district personnel were not maximizing the power of the “to inform” concept. Principals experienced a drop in the quantity of emails as a result of this structure.
 4. Having “to inform” electronic and all in one place provides a single storehouse of information that is easily searchable.
 5. A helpful by-product of this process is that adults are given opportunities to work within one cognitive function for a longer period of time. Sometimes very little attention is paid to sequencing agenda items. Leaders might keep a running file or calendar entry that automatically sequences each time something comes to mind. Voilà! An agenda! A more thoughtful approach includes leaders who use a Morse Code method for sequencing items: long, short, long, short. Another quality that some leaders consider is the assumed difficulty of the item: alternating harder with easier or “softer” item. Another leader might use emotion to create an alternating agenda: hot/cold/hot/cold. *Agenda-Setting Using Infinitives* groups items to prevent constant transitions of expectation. For example, all items that are “To give feedback” are clustered together sequentially. Participants can focus on that expected behavior and not have to return to it during a meeting.
 6. “To decide” is not recommended. Instead, consider “to agree” or “to build consensus.” “To agree” connotes a great deal of power attributed to each individual person: each person has the individual power to thwart the decision for all. “To build consensus” (“I can live with it” was this group’s working definition) provides more flexibility in moving past the decision to action. This group found that “to agree” was rare on their agendas and “to build consensus” more frequent.

Hickory Hill Elementary School, Marietta, Georgia

Hickory Hill has taken this agenda-setting structure to scale. Combined with a knowledge and use of structured conversations (protocols) promulgated by the School Reform Initiative, the school experienced the nearly-impossible. After starting the structure with the leadership team, its members asked if they could use the structure in their own teams. Now each group that meets predictably (e.g., grade levels, leadership team, administration, Response to Intervention, school governance) has adopted this framework and joyfully reports more engagement and high efficiency.