



# What's in Common?

An unspoken assumption is at work in teacher teams that devilishly attempts to thwart meaningful interaction. This is the belief that people who work together must like one another. *Congeniality*, the desire to keep the peace and be polite, is often at odds with *collegiality*, cooperation and sharing responsibility. I developed the What's in Common? protocol with Kerise Ridinger as a simple set of steps that helps clarify the need for shared language in teams and communities while also helping individuals identify what they tend to prioritize, congeniality or collegiality.

## Purpose

Participants aim to identify collegiality as the goal of educator teams.

## Group Size

Generally, groups of eight or more are ideal.

## Sequence

1. Have participants find a partner and identify one thing they have in common that they didn't know about before today (if everyone is from the same school or district, you may declare that commonality off limits). After they find their one thing in common, the partners look up and find other partners who also may be looking up—searching for others are ready to make a larger group. The partners join each other, making a quad. The four introduce themselves and their commonalities, now trying to find a new commonality. No lather, rinse, and repeat—they should always search for something new. The process continues, each group finding a new commonality, then searching for another group to join. Let them know the groups will keep getting bigger and bigger until there is one large circle.
2. When one whole circle exists, ask all members to identify all the commonalities they have already shared (these will be noted but not used for this round). Now the group attempts to find one commonality.
3. Conduct a whole-group reflection.
  - a. Ask participants about methods they used to find the commonalities.
  - b. Ask participants about the impact of group size.
  - c. Ask participants if anyone was in the position of being the only person not agreeing about a potential commonality.
  - d. Ask participants what they used to judge success in finding commonalities.

## MEETING GOALS

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- e. Ask participants to turn and talk with someone to discuss this question: "Congeniality and collegiality—are they the same or different?" After sixty seconds to discuss, ask, "When we were talking to each other trying to find commonalities, was that more like congeniality or collegiality, based on your conversation?"
  - f. In this optional step, ask partners or trios to discuss this question: "One last pair of words—agreement and consensus. Are they the same or different?" After sixty seconds to discuss, ask, "Which is a higher bar for groups?"
4. Debrief the process. (Five minutes)

## Notes

- Common answers for whole-group reflection step 3a include the following: asked questions, made statements and waited for others to react, waited for others to ask me questions, waited for others to make statements, used background knowledge about the other person, and looked at them and made generalizations or assumptions. The group might then explore whether that is the same behavior they tend to exhibit in collaborative groups.
- Common answers for whole-group reflection step 3c include the following: kowtow to the group, just say *no*, and passive-aggressively agree nonverbally with a nod.
- Most participants agree they relied primarily on a nod or smile from others. This can be a great moment to question how often groups make decisions on nonverbal signals, then live to regret it later (for example, when the third-grade team members all nodded about giving a mathematics quiz on Friday only to find that at Monday's meeting, Allie hadn't given the quiz. When asked why, she says, "I never said I would give it Friday!")
- The guiding assumption in step 3e is that many educators believe there is a sequence in all groups. That is congeniality coming first, collegiality coming second. A faulty intervention sometimes suggested to teams that are experiencing rough times might be this: "Your team just needs to go out for lunch the next in-service day—get to know each other." A more viable approach would be to use the actual work of the group to build collegiality, and then perhaps congeniality will come. Frankly, if it doesn't, the team has still met the goal of teacher collaboration and students achieve more in school environments where collaboration is high.
- In step 3f, groups sometimes start to debate which is a higher bar (agreement or consensus) without realizing they have not built a shared understanding of the word *consensus*. I might then offer the operational definition of *I can live with it* to see if that helps bring an understanding that agreement is a higher bar. The key learning for this step is that educator teams often assume agreement is the goal for most conversations without explicitly identifying it as such. For a protocol to work productively with consensus, read the Fist to Five strategy (see appendix E, page 247).

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- Notice in steps 3e–f after educators talk in partners or trios, there is not a share-out. Instead, consider the same behavior we would hope for in classrooms. Instead of replicating the conversation they just had, asking a higher-level question is more worthwhile.

### Application Example

- Working with collaborative team leaders is a perfect place to introduce the ideas of congeniality and collegiality, thinks Robbie, a district-level professional developer. Using the What's in Common? protocol as the opening activity on the first day helps set a context for why collective commitments keep groups working collegially for the benefit of students and their learning.