

# Finding a Better Way to Conduct

## Staff Meetings By Leandra Martinez, Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) in conjunction with John Matich

After sitting through too many marathon meetings feeling frustrated and unproductive throughout his 20 years in education, John Matich, the director of Professional Development for Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), started wondering if there was a better way to facilitate meetings.

“Meetings tend to get off track because of side conversations and often don’t appear to use knowledge or create equity among the participants,” Matich explained. “I sat in these meetings thinking ‘Why are we here? What is the purpose?’ and I realized that there had to be a more efficient way to do this.”

Drawing on his work with Adaptive Schools and Critical Friends, Matich learned that meetings can be run intentionally to support group development and to accomplish specific tasks. After considering the key goals that groups try to accomplish during meetings—keeping everyone updated on each other’s work, accomplishing tasks, making decisions—Matich developed the 30-Minute Meeting. This strategy is a weekly meeting that outlines current updates, questions, needs, and next steps. With busy schedules and limited time, the 30-Minute Meeting offers a way for teams to consistently check in with each other and establish working goals for the week. During the meeting, participants share updates, pose questions and/or needs to the group, and sign up to respond to a question/need and that directly pertains to them. This process also supports distributed leadership as facilitators and recorders are rotated every week. The 30-Minute Meeting doesn’t take the place of planning, reflecting or problem-resolving meetings. However, it highlights the needs for those meetings

and allows participants to sign up and schedule them for another time.

LAEP began using the 30-Minute Meeting when four separate departments merged into one. It quickly became apparent that there was a need for staff to efficiently share updates about their work and to create a cohesive department. “We were so used to working in isolation and didn’t know what was happening with the person down the hall,” recounted Carlos Donoso, LAEP’s Transform Schools manager. “The 30-Minute Meeting made us more aware of what everyone was doing and has created a more supportive environment where we are all stepping outside of our job descriptions to support each other’s work.”

Not only has the 30-Minute Meeting been an effective way to facilitate department meetings at LAEP, but schools in our network have put it into practice.

David Levine, teacher at the School of History and Dramatic Arts (SoHDA) in Los Angeles, struggled with meetings filled with “endless conversations about minutia that left us with no conclusions or solutions. [We were] getting into operational conversations, when we needed to be talking about curriculum.”

Since SoHDA began using the 30-Minute Meeting, Levine says that they now have more convivial and solutions-based meetings. “We are a very ‘get it done group’ and we like to know we have gotten things solved and problems, issues, and challenges don’t linger. It means a lot to us to be able to look at our list and see progress,” Levine said. “Being able to solve needs between two people rather than the whole group saves time and stress for all.”



John Matich is the Los Angeles Education Partnership’s director of Professional Development, a position he has held since 2004. He has ten years of teaching experience, primarily in middle school social studies. Over the past nine years, John had defined the LAEP coaching and professional learning models based on his expertise in Cognitive Coaching™, Adaptive Schools™, and Critical Friends Groups. John is certified as an Agency Trainer at the Center for Cognitive Coaching and the Center for Adaptive Schools.

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Similarly, teachers at the Los Angeles River School have been using the 30-Minute Meeting as a faculty meeting protocol for two years. Since using this strategy, teacher Paul Payne has noticed a change in their school's group dynamics. "We actually enjoy spending time together as a whole staff," Payne noted. "We've become really good at identifying individual versus whole group needs and we don't waste time on concerns that only require a few people's attention. Everyone has a chance to give input on topics they feel passionate about, but without the laborious conversations that make faculty meetings drag on and on."

The 30-Minute Meeting allows groups to share updates and complete tasks, but Matich also infused the meeting with grounding strategies, distributed leadership, and opportunities to reflect that he found were often missing from previous meetings. The facilitator signals the beginning of the meeting by inviting everybody to state their name, how they are feeling, and saying, "I'm in." This strategy allows people's voices to be heard early in the meeting, builds relational trust, and acknowledges how people are feeling at the particular time to avoid behavioral assumptions about how people are behaving.

"The strategy creates a sense of community and moves us from 'me' to 'we'," Matich said. "People think 'we don't need that fluff,' but we know from research that intentional strategies that support group development often matter more than the task at hand."

He found this to be true when he first tried the "I'm in" strategy with a group. When beginning a meeting with a group of teachers, Matich felt low energy in the room, so he tried the strategy to bring the group together. As the group members took turns saying how they were feeling and "I'm in," one teacher who looked disengaged since sitting

down said that he had a family emergency the night before, but he knew how important the meeting was to the group.

"If we hadn't done the grounding strategy, we wouldn't have known why he was behaving the way he was. He wasn't mentally present at the meeting, but we understood what was happening," Matich said.

At the end of the meeting, the group has the opportunity to reflect on the process and voice frustrations or satisfactions. "Reflection is one of the most neglected pieces of learning," Matich noted. "Without reflection, one-third of the group might think it went well while two-thirds might think the meeting did not meet their needs." As a result of the reflection process during LAEP's 30-Minute Meeting, LAEP staff adjusted the process multiple times to increase craftsmanship around the meeting. The meeting initially began with someone recording all of the updates as people were talking. Now, everybody types their updates and questions/needs prior to the meeting so that it runs smoothly.

One of the most challenging elements as a participant is the "no cross talk" rule. Cross talk often is a main factor in getting meetings side tracked and lasting far longer than intended. "The intent is to listen to each other. When you cross talk, you're not listening," Matich explained. "When we know that we can't talk, it forces us to be better listeners because we are not trying to think about what we're going to say next."

When groups first begin using the 30-Minute Meeting, there's a concern that it won't be productive for people or that people will not follow the process. However, the exact opposite has happened. Groups at schools and non-profits have embraced it and found that the protocol highlights and celebrates work in a simple, structured way. 