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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Intentional Moves.
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As an effective teacher, you have a strong understanding of how children learn, and this influences the intentional decisions you make in the classroom. For instance, because you understand the primary need for a child to feel a sense of belonging in order to learn, you might manage a student’s negative behavior in a way that does not alienate the child, make teaching and learning decisions that communicate that this child belongs in your class, and teach in a culturally responsive way. But, why bring up what teachers understand about child learning in a book about leading teams of adult learners? Well, first, it goes without saying that skillful team leaders (STLs) must be effective educators. They have a good grasp on what to teach, how to teach, how students learn, and what to do when they don’t. But being an effective teacher does not guarantee being an effective team leader. STLs have a strong understanding of how adults learn.

Not until the 1970s did the notion start to catch on that the learning needs of adults might be different from those of children. Malcolm Knowles (1975) wrote extensively about adult learning, which he called andragogy (the opposite of pedagogy, which focuses on child learning). His work developed from that of numerous researchers and psychologists dating back to the 1920s.

In the 21st century, Ellie Drago-Severson (2009) published a helpful tool for understanding how adult learners make meaning of the world. Drago-Severson’s “Four Ways of Knowing” (based on Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan’s [2009] constructive developmental theory) categorizes adult learners in one of four different stages of development: (1) rule-bound, or instrumental; (2) other-focused, or socializing; (3) reflective, or self-authoring; and (4) interconnected, or self-transforming. Figure 5 briefly summarizes each way of knowing as it relates to how a person might engage in learning.

Although the stages are hierarchical, Drago-Severson (2009) makes clear that different circumstances call for different ways of knowing. In other words, being “rule-bound” or “other-focused” is not bad (e.g., you want your accountant to be rule-bound). Moreover, her work emphasizes the importance of providing various supports and challenges to adult learners to help advance their developmental trajectories. Based on my understanding of the ways of knowing and my experiences in working with adult learners, it seems to me that if no adults on a team are developmentally ready to be self-authoring (reflective) or self-transforming (interconnected), then group learning will be limited.
### FIGURE 5  Adult Ways of Knowing on a Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WAYS OF KNOWING</th>
<th>RULE-BOUND (INSTRUMENTAL)</th>
<th>OTHER-FOCUSED (SOCIALIZING)</th>
<th>REFLECTIVE (SELF-AUTHORING)</th>
<th>INTERCONNECTED (SELF-TRANSFORMING)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>• Views the world in terms of right and wrong.</td>
<td>• Makes meaning of the world through others’ opinions.</td>
<td>• Views the world through their own system of values and beliefs.</td>
<td>• Views the world as interconnected; is not intimidated by paradox, contradictions, complexity, or uncertainty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What you might hear</td>
<td>• Do we have permission to do this?</td>
<td>• What will people think if I do this?</td>
<td>• I need to do this to become better.</td>
<td>• I need to hear from others to deepen my understanding of the issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels assured when . . .</td>
<td>• But that’s not how we’ve done this before.</td>
<td>• What do you think I should do?</td>
<td>• I’ll consider what you say, but I’ll come to my own conclusion.</td>
<td>• I challenge conventions and accepted theories and practices, even my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs to be successful</td>
<td>• This is what we were told to do, so we have to do it.</td>
<td>• I’ll go along with whatever the group thinks we should do.</td>
<td>• I set the standards for myself and others.</td>
<td>• I seek systemic improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs to grow and develop</td>
<td>• Clear goals and parameters.</td>
<td>• I need to hear multiple viewpoints.</td>
<td>• Time for analysis and evaluation.</td>
<td>• Time for research, exploration, synthesis, and innovation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Procedures, timelines, and details.</td>
<td>• Feedback couched in appreciation.</td>
<td>• Feedback that emphasizes the person’s competence.</td>
<td>• Nuanced feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Direct explicit feedback.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Based on Ellie Drago-Severson’s work in Leading Adult Learning (Corwin, 2009).*
In this chapter, I present five essential understandings about adult learners, a synthesis of what Knowles (1975) and Drago-Severson (2009) have said, together with learning from my own experience and the experience of other STLs. If you have led teams of adult learners, or have simply been an adult learner on a team, then the following essential understandings will likely resonate with your experience.

1. Adults are natural problem solvers and self-directed learners.

2. Adults need to know why they are learning something new, how it is relevant to them, and what practical application it has.

3. Adults are motivated by learning that improves either who they are or what they do.

4. Adults know the best ways in which they learn.

5. Adults want to be treated as professionals with their experience and expertise acknowledged.

Key point: I do believe that adult learners are developmentally distinct from child learners, and yet, I also believe that some principles are common to both. For instance, both students and adults have a need to know why they are learning something.

1. Adults are natural problem solvers and self-directed learners.

YouTube carries nearly 14 billion “How To” videos. Amazon carries over 100,000 books with the words How To in the title. Our overwhelming interest in seeking out how to do things speaks to adults’ problem-solving nature and predilection for self-directed learning.

While there may be disagreements on what is or isn’t a problem, or how to solve it, educators want to make things better for students, families, and their teaching. They, too, enjoy having autonomy in decisions about what they learn, when, and how. The need for autonomy does not start at adulthood. It begins in an individual’s formative years, gains momentum during adolescence, and only strengthens with age. Over time, a person’s self-concept shifts from being dependent on others to learn, to being self-directed. Malcolm Knowles (1975) describes self-directed learning as “a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18). His choice of words, “without the help of others,” is slightly misleading. Self-direction doesn’t mean going solo, so don’t go abandoning your team just yet. In fact, studies show that self-directed learners engage with an average of 10 people throughout a learning journey by seeking guidance, expertise, resources,
and/or encouragement from them. Self-directed also doesn’t necessarily mean self-taught. Many self-directed learners identify problems they wish to resolve and seek traditional methods of education and collaborative opportunities to learn how to do it. In other words, self-directed learning in which adults engage in inquiry and problem solving can very much be a team sport.

The need for adults to solve problems and engage in self-directed learning is one reason that collaborative inquiry is a preferred method of learning for educators. Launch a teacher-directed inquiry cycle focused on a student-learning challenge.

2. **Adults need to know why they are learning something new, how it is relevant to them, and what practical application it has.**

Why is *why* one of the first questions adults need answered when requested to learn something new? Is it because they expect learning to be worthwhile, or because they’ve spent a lot of time in mandated professional development that was not useful? Or do they need to see a clear reason for learning something new, or how it applies to the “real” work that they do with students? Yes all around.

When adult learning is self-directed, the *why* is very clear: The learner has identified a compelling problem or gap in their own knowledge or skill, and this motivates them to learn and change. But when the reason to learn does not originate with the adult learner, and is instead mandated from someone else without explanation as to why, then the adult has little reason to invest in new learning.

Embedded within the simple three-letter question, *why*, are more questions: *Why this; why not that? Why me; why not someone else? Why now; why not some other time?* Communicate the answers to these questions, and if the reasons are clearly relevant and applicable to your colleagues, they will embrace new learning.

3. **Adults are motivated by learning that improves either who they are or what they do.**

It troubles me when I hear someone say that a child or an adult is unmotivated to learn. Humans are wired to learn from a very young age. Babies do not need to be externally motivated to walk; they do so because it’s instinctual, and because there are natural rewards built in. They can get around. And, they hear the singing praise of their doting caretakers. Once children enter adolescence, they don’t suddenly lose their motivation to learn; they just need teachers who can help them access learning by being responsive to their rapidly developing minds and bodies.
All adult learners, too, are motivated learners—yes, even the person who appears to want nothing to do with your team. STLs understand what intrinsically motivates educators. Studies show that so long as adults can see how team learning will improve their performance with students or how it will better who they are as a person and practitioner, they will be motivated. (This is particularly true for those who are self-authoring/reflective knowers [see Figure 5] for whom competence is important.) It’s only when the work of teams does not deliver either, or when the team has been collaborating for a while without any visible progress, that adults lose motivation. Connect new learning to ways in which people will grow or practice will improve.

4. Adults know the best ways in which they learn.

Although learning-style research is debated as of late, adults typically know how they learn best. Adults often say things such as “I need a visual.” “I need an oral explanation.” “I need some time to process this.” “I need to act first, process later.” “I need to think through this out loud.” “I need to learn this in small chunks.” With many learning years behind them, adults have found what works best for them and tend to expect time in teams to allow them the freedom to learn in the ways they need. Trust the adults on your team.

5. Adults want to be treated as professionals with their experience and expertise acknowledged.

Perhaps nothing is more off-putting to adult learners than being talked down to. Adults respond best to leaders who recognize their knowledge and expertise in the design and delivery of learning. This does not mean they want public shout-outs or certificates for what they know (though Ellie Drago-Severson’s [2009] research does point to one type of adult learner as someone looking for approval). Be mindful of your word choice, meeting design, and ways in which you celebrate individual and team progress.