

**Purpose:** An “Unconference” is a professional-learning opportunity led entirely by participants. The goal of an Unconference is to empower participants to suggest items of concern/interest to them, then discuss and brainstorm solutions/strategies together. An Unconference prioritizes conversation and collaboration over presentation. The beauty of an Unconference is that there are no pre-set agendas, no PowerPoint presentations, and no hierarchical structure – it’s truly a gathering that facilitates the development of professionals, by, with, and through those professionals.

**Time required:** Typically, 45-60 minutes per session

**Materials:** Commitment to improvement, chart paper, bold colored markers

### **Prior to the Unconference**

Even though there’s no “lead presenter” in an Unconference, this learning experience must be moderated by a facilitator (or a small team of organizers). Whenever possible, the facilitator(s) should send the expectations and event guidelines to participants in advance. If running an all-day or multiple-session event, the facilitator(s) can post a schedule for the day in a prominent place (or an online form) for participants to sign up to lead particular discussions at particular times.

**Special note for facilitator(s):** Flexibility is the #1 trait of effective facilitators of an Unconference. Let go of any preconceived notions you have about professional learning conferences and allow participants to run the show.

### **Prepping – 5-10 minutes**

**Step 1:** Once participants have gathered, provide time for informal conversation, reflection, and discussion. This will allow participants to surface the questions, concerns, challenges, and ideas (a.k.a. their “Problems of Practice”) that are of greatest interest to them.

**Step 2:** Invite participants to suggest Problems of Practice about which they’d be willing to lead a discussion. Whenever possible, help the participant-leader reframe the Problem of Practice as a question. This will help provide structure and guidance to the conversation. Write this question on a piece of chart paper, and post it on the wall in whatever space that conversation will take place. The participant who posed the question will serve as this discussion leader.

Repeat Step 2 as many times as needed (until there is roughly one question posted for each 8-12 participants).

**Step 3:** The rest of the participants take a moment to consider which of the conversations they’d like to join. There is no right or wrong way to decide – it’s up to each individual.

## The Discussions – 25-30 minutes

**Step 4:** Participants join their chosen conversation. The discussion leader chooses a participant to serve as recorder – this person will take brief notes on the chart paper to archive the discussion as needed. During the conversation, once the original Problem of Practice (question) is posed, the discussion is fluid. The only rules are these, and of course they're negotiable:

1. Speak respectfully and work earnestly together to address the Problem of Practice in question.
2. Everyone engages. Speak. Ask. Listen. Learn. Share. Probe. Contemplate. (No lurking.)
3. Vote with your feet. If the conversation isn't meeting your needs, politely move to another discussion.

## The Summary – 15-20 minutes

**Step 5:** At the conclusion of the allotted time, all participants gather together. The discussion leaders, one by one, share their original Problems of Practice, then provide a summary of the discussions and any outcomes (plans, additional questions, new information, etc.) that arose as a result.

**Step 6:** All participants individually reflect on their learning experience during this session: These questions may be helpful to prompt reflection and/or discussion:

- ✓ What discussion did you lead/join? Why did you select that one?
- ✓ What are your takeaways from this discussion? What is one thing you are prepared/willing to do differently as a result?
- ✓ How did your contributions support the learning of your colleagues? How so?
- ✓ What did you gain from this experience? Why do you think so?
- ✓ What might have made this learning experience more powerful for you? How might you help make that happen?
- ✓ What questions do you still have? How might you go about addressing them?

**Step 7:** Thank participants to their participation and contributions. If the Unconference is continuing, redirect participants to the event agenda.