

The following principles, informed by the work of Malcolm Knowles and other theorists, can serve as guideposts when working with adult learners. They encompass what is known about brain science, learning theory, behavioral and cognitive psychology, and to some extent sociology. Following a brief explanation of the principle, you'll see a handful of implications for team leaders.

Principles

Implications for Leaders

**ADULTS
MUST FEEL
SAFE TO LEARN**

- Use structures to invite equity of participation in discussions.
- Do everything you can to address power dynamics between yourself and your team.
- Show up as a learner in this space—you are also a learner.
- Establish and use community agreements; have a process observer during meetings.
- Pay attention to feelings and cultivate your team's emotional intelligence.

**ADULTS COME
TO LEARNING
EXPERIENCES
WITH HISTORIES**

- Find out what team members know and can do.
- Create opportunities for people to tell stories and share past experiences.
- Invite team members to take on roles and responsibilities within the team that match their skill set.
- When a team is forming, facilitate discussions about previous experiences working in teams.

Principles

**ADULTS NEED
TO KNOW WHY
WE HAVE TO
LEARN
SOMETHING**

Implications for Leaders

- Include a section on agendas that articulates the reason for each activity.
- At the start of each meeting or PD, share your reason for the learning, and give learners an opportunity to make meaning of what they'll do and how it might help them.
- Draw a connection between that day's learning and the school's goals, mission, or vision.
- At the start of sessions, ask participants to identify a challenge they're facing that the day's PD might address. Ask them to reflect on their connections at the end of the session.
- Connect the learning to previous questions and challenges that members of the group have raised.

**ADULTS WANT
AGENCY IN OUR
LEARNING**

- Ask team members to reflect on and share how they learn best. Be responsive to these needs.
- Guide participants to identify their areas for growth and professional learning goals.
- Ask for input and feedback in person and anonymously.
- Use all kinds of data to help adults make decisions about their learning.
- Invite people to name their colleagues with whom they want to collaborate or learn. Give participants surveys to assess their learning needs.

The Principles of Adult Learning

Principles

Implications for Leaders

**ADULTS NEED
PRACTICE TO
INTERNALIZE
LEARNING**

- On any agenda, include time to practice new skills and time to reflect.
- Reduce the number of objectives on an agenda.
- Contain the new information to less than a third of the meeting time, and use the rest of the time practice, make meaning of the information, and draw connections.
- Close learning sessions with quiet writing time, and ask participants to name their takeaways and ideas about how they'll apply their learning.
- Use structures such as role-plays where participants give each other feedback.

**ADULTS HAVE
A PROBLEM-
CENTERED
ORIENTATION
TO LEARNING**

- Facilitate processes for educators to identify the problems in their schools, teams, or departments.
- Engage team members in naming their individual challenges and areas for growth.
- Balance meeting time that builds skill that can be applied immediately with opportunities for reflection.
- Use structures and protocols, which blend depth of thinking with application.
- Use role-play practices or other experiential activities that simulate real challenges.

**ADULTS
WANT TO
LEARN**

- If someone seems uninterested in learning, keep reminding yourself that all adults want to learn.
- If there's low interest in learning, consider the conditions for learning—is the learning relevant? Have participants had a say in their learning? Do they feel safe?
- Find out what team members want to learn about—keep asking and asking.
- Ask about previous learning experiences—as an adult and a child.
- Whenever possible, make learning fun.