



How to: Conduct a Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting

When a teacher has a student who struggles with classroom academics or behavior, that instructor may invite the student (and perhaps the parents) to a conference. The intention of this meeting typically is to understand the cause(s) of the student's difficulties and to put together an action plan to address them. However, the actual meeting often unfolds quite differently.

It is not unusual for educators to open these meetings with a stern warning to the student about his or her poor performance and dire predictions of what negative outcomes will occur if that student does not improve. In response, the student then becomes defensive or withdrawn. Adults (sometimes including the parent) then gang up on the student, redoubling their efforts to convince the learner of the need to make positive changes. This cycle continues until the meeting adjourns, with a sullen student who now feels coerced and is thus unlikely to participate in any action plan.

This student-conference scenario -- lecturing adults, disaffected student, failed action plan--is quite common. The puzzle is why. Educators, after all, are usually genuinely concerned about underperforming or misbehaving students and really do want them to be successful. And while students may sometimes be ambivalent about school, they often do have at least some desire to improve their school standing and performance. So why does conflict emerge when all parties share the same goal?

One potential and powerful explanation is that the caring adults, teachers and even parents, cause the conflict--with the best of intentions. Let's investigate why.

When students experience school difficulties they commonly respond with mixed emotions. On the one hand, they may experience frustration and a desire to escape the situation; on the other, they may recognize the value of putting more effort into their classwork or behavior. When students at a problem-solving meeting experience this oscillation between negative and positive impulses, a crucial factor that can swing that learner toward motivated change or obstinate stasis is the interactive style of the adults (Miller & Rollnick, 2004). When a teacher or counselor or assistant principal speaks in authoritarian terms, telling the student what he or she 'must' do, that student predictably can shut down. Conversely, when the same adult instead actively listens and helps the student to articulate goals for change, odds increase that the student will be motivated to follow through with this plan (Bundy, 2004).

The educator who wants to conclude a conference with a motivated student ready to implement a change plan should follow these two pieces of advice.

- Do not get into an argument with the student! As the saying goes, it takes two to argue. By avoiding a lecturing or authoritarian style and using respectful language and tone of voice, the educator keeps the lines of communication open.
- Listen for 'change talk' (Miller & Rollnick, 2004)-- that is, student statements that express hope, interest in making positive changes, a willingness to try new strategies, or other positive attitudes. Often elements of student change talk are intermixed with expressions of uncertainty, frustration, and doubt. By listening carefully, however, the educator can draw attention to that change talk, reinforce it, have the student elaborate on it, and thus increase that learner's optimism and confidence (Miller & Rollnick, 2004).



The remainder of this article includes resources that can assist any teacher, support staff member, or administrator to engineer positive student-centered problem-solving conferences that result in a workable and motivating change plan.

The *Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Teacher's Guide* provides a 5-step agenda for conferences that is optimized to promote student accountability and motivation. It also includes a set of 'Introductory Talking Points' to be used to start off the meeting.

Communication Tools to Motivate and Engage the Reluctant Student inventories simple methods for drawing out the student and highlighting elements of change talk--while avoiding falling into the argument trap.



Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Teacher's Guide

STEP 1: INTRODUCE THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS. At the start of the meeting, the teacher opens with a brief set of talking points that state the purpose of the discussion, lay out the agenda, and emphasize the student's role as full participant who retains control over the creation and content of a change-plan. (See sample *Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Introductory Talking Points* later in this document.) These talking points are key to effective meetings, as they establish the outcome goal as the creation of a change-plan and encourage the student to take an active and participatory role.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student understands the purpose and agenda of the meeting and the active role he or she is to play in it.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY TARGET FOR CHANGE. In this step, teacher and student agree on a current problem that is to be the target of discussion and a change plan. (Generally, a single problem is recommended, to keep the scope of the final change plan manageable.) Examples of suitable problems are limited homework completion; low test, quiz, or course grades; and poor class attendance.

While the conference is student-centered, as the teacher, you can take the lead at this stage of the meeting in naming the problem that most concerns you (e.g., "Rick, we are here because we need to find a way to improve your class attendance."). After all, attendance, grades, and homework completion are not negotiable problems, since poor performance on any one of these can lead to course failure and other negative outcomes.

Also, when data are available, the teacher and/or student should quantify and record the magnitude of the target problem. Here are examples: "I have not turned in 30% of my homework assignments; I have missed 10 of 24 possible class sessions"; "I have a class grade average of 50").

If the student has several candidates for target problems, you can decide together which problem should be selected for immediate action, with the understanding that you can meet again at a future time to create further action plans for the additional student challenges.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when you and the student have chosen, written down, and (when possible) adequately quantified the target problem.

STEP 3: ESTABLISH THE CHANGE GOAL. Having established what the target problem is, you and the student will next set the goal that the student wishes to accomplish--the 'change goal'.

In most instances, the general change goal is obvious, as it is the solution to the target problem chosen in the previous step. For a student with poor class attendance, for example, the logical change goal is consistently to show up to class on time.

It is recommended that the change goal be stated in clear and specific terms that will allow an observer to verify it as accomplished ('yes') or not accomplished ('no'). A class-attendance change goal for Rick, for example, may be worded as: "I will miss no more than one class session in the next 5 weeks of school." Stated in this way, there will be no doubt at the end of 5 weeks whether the student's attendance goal has been successfully met.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student has selected an appropriate change goal and that goal is worded to allow for a 'yes/no' judgment about completion.



STEP 4: VISUALIZE THE CHANGE GOAL. Research shows that we increase our motivation to reach a goal when we actively visualize--even briefly-- the benefits that this future accomplishment will bring us (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010). Once a change goal has been set, the teacher directs the student to take a moment to (1) imagine that the student has attained the change goal ; and (2) describe and write down how his or her situation would improve as a result.

The student Rick, for example, may envision benefits of improving his attendance as, "I will get better grades; kids won't tease me about skipping; I won't have to keep meeting with my teacher and the counselor; my mom won't get so many phone calls; I can pass the course and graduate on time."

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student has made a genuine effort to visualize, describe, and record tangible benefits of reaching the change goal.

STEP 5: IDENTIFY OBSTACLES TO THE CHANGE GOAL AND DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN. The gap that the student must close to reach his or her change goal can be considerable, and numerous obstacles can interfere with success. Ideally, the student will retain a sense of optimism when working toward a change goal. The odds for success increase considerably, however, when the student has also anticipated and brainstormed solutions for difficulties that will inevitably arise along the way (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010).

With the student primed by the just-completed exercise of envisioning a successful change goal, the teacher now directs that student to think about the contrast between the desired goal and his or her current situation. Next, the student is asked to list any obstacles that might prevent him or her from moving from the current situation to the change goal. Once this list of obstacles has been generated, the student comes up with and records one or more ideas to overcome each obstacle. When completed, the list of obstacles and corresponding solutions serves as the student's action plan for attaining the change goal.

The student Rick, for example, may identify two primary obstacles that could interfere with the change goal of getting to class on time: (1) He notes that he often oversleeps; and (2) he admits that sometimes he intentionally skips class because his homework is not done.

- To address the obstacle of oversleeping, Rick identifies the strategies of getting to bed earlier and setting an alarm.
- To ensure that he completes homework for the course, Rick settles on the solutions of scheduling a fixed time each night for doing homework and giving priority to completing any homework for the course in which he has poor attendance.

This list of obstacles and their solutions is Rick's action plan to achieve the change goal of "missing no more than one class session in the next 5 weeks of school."

You and the student have finished this Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting when the student has identified a target problem to fix, articulated a change goal, and created an action plan (consisting of potential obstacles and matching solutions) to reach the change goal.



Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Introductory Talking Points

<p><i>Welcome. We are meeting today to talk about how to [insert the reason for the problem-solving conference: e.g., "get your missing assignments turned in"; "improve your course grade"].</i></p> <p><i>Our purpose is to come up with a plan that will help you to be successful.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to develop an action plan today and then are able to follow through with it, I am confident that you will achieve your goals and be successful in this class.</i></p>	<p>Statement of Purpose. The opening segment states the meeting focus.</p> <p>The concluding statement in this section is patterned as a 'growth mindset' statement (Dweck, 2006).</p>
<p><i>In our meeting, we will:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>identify one or more challenges to work on, and</i> • <i>set goal(s) to overcome those challenges.</i> <p><i>If you agree, we will then:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>design an action plan for you to reach your goals.</i> 	<p>Agenda. The teacher briefly sketches out the 3 meeting stages: (1) problem identification; (2) goals for improvement; and (3) [optionally] creation of an individualized 'change plan'.</p>
<p><i>I can help with this action plan.</i></p> <p><i>But it's up to you to decide whether to create the plan and--if so--what will go into it.</i></p> <p><i>Throughout the meeting, please be as honest as you can in telling me what is interfering with your success in the classroom, how I or others in our school can help you, and what other supports you might need.</i></p> <p><i>Let's begin!</i></p>	<p>Rules of Engagement. The student is encouraged to be a full participant in the problem-solving meeting.</p> <p>Note that the script emphasizes the student's discretion in deciding whether to participate in a change plan.</p>



Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Recording Form

Meeting Information		
Student:	Meeting Participants:	Meeting Date:

Identify Your Target for Change. Select the target problem that you want to be the focus of this change plan. (When possible, use data to describe the problem more clearly.)

Target: Write a description of your target problem:

Establish Your Change Goal. Come up with your change goal to resolve the target problem. State the change goal in clear, specific terms to allow an observer to verify whether it has been accomplished ('yes') or not accomplished ('no').

Goal: Write in the goal that you plan to work toward:

Visualize Your Change Goal. Imagine that you have accomplished your change goal. Write down what improvements or benefits would result:

Visualize: Write down benefits you can imagine experiencing if you meet your goal:



Develop Your Action Plan.. Imagine likely obstacles that might interfere with your success in reaching your goal
Then plan for how to overcome each obstacle:

Action Plan: In the left column, write down obstacles that you think might prevent you from achieving your change-goal. In the right column, write down solutions for overcoming each obstacle:

Obstacles	Solutions



References

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Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2004). Talking oneself into change: Motivational interviewing, stages of change, and therapeutic process. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 18(4), 299-308.

Oettingen, G., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (2010). Strategies of setting and implementing goals. In J. E. Maddux & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Social psychological foundations of clinical psychology*. (pp. 114-135). New York: The Guilford Press.