We have found this process to be useful in uncovering unexamined assumptions among leadership teams in the Learning to Learn Initiative.

You will need a significant amount of time devoted to group dialogue, but we hope you will adapt these resources to suit your own circumstances.

Challenging assumptions
Making Assumptions Explicit

Assumptions = the taken for granted or implicit suppositions, claims or beliefs upon which propositions appear to be based (Butts, 1965, p. 1)

The power of making assumptions explicit and testing their accuracy has been widely recommended by educational theorists (see for example, Cochran-Smith, 2000, Eraut, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000). There have been a number of studies in which assumptions have been used as frameworks for examining particular educational policies or practices. For instance, a framework of assumptions was used by Butts (1965) to examine the goals, administration, content and methods of Australian education and by Middleton and Hill (1996) to analyse the ethos of industrial schooling in Australia. Assumptions were also used by Lipman (1998) to problematise the school restructuring movement in America with particular reference to the education of African American students.

Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991) in their study of change projects found that ‘educational change fails partly because of the assumptions of planners’ (p.94). They concluded: When we begin to understand what change is as people experience it, we begin also to see clearly that assumptions made by planners of change are extremely important determinants of whether the realities of implementation get confronted or ignored. (p. 105)

Describe
What is the challenge? (1 sentence)

Inform/Justify
What assumptions are implicit in this challenge?
Where did these come from?

Confront/Reflect
Are these assumptions valid? How do you know?
Are any of these assumptions open to challenge?

Reconstruct
In light of the above, could the challenge be reframed?
What does this mean for moving forward?

Critically reflecting on leadership challenges
QUESTIONS INFORMING CRITICAL REFLECTION

1 What is the problem situation?
Who are the different groups involved in the problem situation?
Are all the groups equally powerful?
Are any groups significantly disadvantaged or oppressed?

2 How is the problem commonly identified?
How is it named? (What name is used to identify the problem?)
Whose perspective does the problem as commonly identified represent?
What historical events have contributed to this perspective? .
What is the implied social theory in this common way of naming the problem?
Whose interests are served?
What relationship is there between the naming of the problem and the self-interests of those who name it this way?

3 What are the consequences of naming the problem this way?
What are the implied solutions?
Will it liberate or conserve?
Will it maintain control/social order?

4 What happens to the problem when situated in the wider socio-political arena (that is, situated in the larger configuration of economic, cultural and political power)?
How can the problem be re-named in recognition of the conflict and structural inequality of which it is a part?
How can the problem be re-named in acknowledgement of the situation being a site of ideological/ political contestation?
How can the problem be re-named to represent the perspective of the most disadvantaged/ oppressed in the situation?
Will the problem as named impact on the oppressive dynamics of racism, sexism, classism etc?

5 How could the problem be identified to contribute to such ideals as self-and group-empowerment social justice or human emancipation?

6 Confrontation through the posing of critical questions such questions provided by Smyth (1991) are:
What do my practices say about my assumptions, values and beliefs about teaching?
Where did these ideas come from?
What social practices are expressed in these ideas?
What is it that causes me to maintain my theories?
What views of power do they embody?
Whose interests seem to be served by my practices?
What is it that acts to constrain my views of what is possible in teaching

(Smith, B. page 116)
QUESTIONS INFORMING CRITICAL REFLECTION

• What is the problem situation?
• How is the problem commonly identified?
• What are the consequences of naming the problem this way?
• What happens to the problem when situated in the wider arena (i.e. the larger configuration of economic, cultural and political power)?
• How could the problem be identified to contribute to the ideals of sharing power; social justice or human rights?
• What are the critical questions which will challenge current practices?

(Smith, B. page 116)
GROUP PROCESS

• Brief discussion on assumptions (refer to Assumptions article by Judy Peters)

• Site teams spend approximately 10 mins writing their challenge

• Site teams split up and form groups of three or four people

• Refer to Cross-site Group task for the rest of the instructions
Cross-site Group Task (could be among different groups within one site)

• Representative from each site to briefly (no more than 5 minutes) summarise their responses to the questions, followed by 5 minutes for representatives from other sites to respond in ways that promote further reflection (e.g. giving feedback, asking questions of clarification, suggesting further assumptions).

• In the final ten minutes, the whole group reviews assumptions to identify three that have been powerful in challenging their thinking about the challenges to leaders working in Learning to Learn. These should be recorded on the paper provided and brought back to the whole group.
References


