



Creating a Culture of Innovation & Creativity

Guidelines for Operating as a Think Tank



Introduction

CREC is unique. Our organization is made up of dreamers, builders, protectors, and doers. CREC employees are the measure of what this organization can do.

Our culture is one of high expectations for our employees and our teams because our mission demands it. To maintain our competitive advantage, we must commit to a process of continuous improvement. We must constantly refine and adjust our business model to stay ahead of the competition and continue to challenge the status quo in education.

CREC is committed to creating a working environment that promotes discernment, risk-taking, innovation, and divergent thinking. In order to facilitate this kind of thinking, each program, school, division, and site is responsible to operate as a think tank when planning, strategizing, and problem solving. This booklet contains guidelines for how teams and individuals will operate to ensure the organization's long-term strength. Together, your collective efforts and our culture will determine our path for decades to come.

Be bold, courageous, and do great things. Do things the CREC way.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Greg J. Florio".

Greg J. Florio, Ed.D.
Executive Director

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OUR VISION

CREC's mission, vision, and core values are the foundation for your work with the community and your interactions with other employees. We believe that these principles, in combination with collaborative professional relationships and ample opportunities for growth, help us live out the daily actions, behaviors, and beliefs that are essential to serving the best interests of children and families.

MISSION

Equity, excellence, and success for all through high-quality educational services

VISION

To become our member districts' primary resource to facilitate collaborative efforts that create equitable and sustainable educational opportunities, assist in maximizing district and regional resources, and advance successful educational practices for all learners at all ages.

CORE VALUES

- Expect Excellence
- Act with Courage
- Demand Equity
- Embrace Collaboration

A CULTURE OF INNOVATION & CREATIVITY

At CREC, we believe in bottom-up innovation and top-down facilitation. We're dedicated to creating a culture of innovation and creativity in each division, department, building, and classroom. This facilitates divergent thinking, active problem solving, and generating the kinds of ideas that will help us to shatter the status quo. Adhering to the following principles creates an environment that stimulates innovation and allows think-tank behavior to be the norm:

- We don't believe that there are right or wrong ideas. We want you and your teams to have room to think in new ways, try new things, and take creative risks.
- We encourage you to draw upon your diverse experiences and professional training to solve problems and improve practice.
- The culture belongs to you. Everyone must hold themselves and each other accountable for creating and maintaining a culture that helps us achieve individual and collective success.

OPERATING AS A THINK TANK

WHAT IS A THINK TANK?

A think tank is a mode of operating that encourages each member of the group to participate at their highest individual capacity. Any team or group can form a think tank to create a plan, discuss a challenge, or solve a problem. As a member of a think tank, each person commits to actions that allow the group to operate efficiently and effectively, and to behave in a manner that serves the betterment of the group.

Think-tank meetings should be vibrant, energized, and efficient. The results of a think tank are plans, products, and processes that have been properly dissected, vetted, and formed. These outcomes represent the group's best thinking.

WHEN WE NEED TO SOLVE A PROBLEM, WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE IF WE WERE TO APPROACH IT WITH A THINK-TANK MENTALITY?

Approaching a problem or issue with a think-tank mentality means attacking the problem with focus, passion, and the group's best thinking. The group:

- Defines the problem
- Asks questions
- Identifies priorities
- Defines risks
- Monitors human and financial costs
- Collects appropriate research
- Leverages collective knowledge to come to a resolution

As a result of these actions, the group generates many viable, high-quality solutions to a challenge.

WHAT ARE THE RULES AND NORMS OF A THINK TANK?

For a team to operate as a think tank, all members must commit to a common vision and the goal of operating with a think-tank mentality. The outcomes and products of a think tank are direct consequences of the group's ability to collectively monitor and enforce the expectations of operating as a think tank. Think-tank norms include:

- Mutual respect
- Open, honest, and courageous conversations where members share ideas
- A focus on the mission
- Clarity about the goals and expected outcomes

Members' roles include:

- Having equal accountability for the conversation's results
- Owning ideas as a group, not as individual members
- Sharing responsibility to challenge and question ideas, build on comments, identify pitfalls and problems, and contribute ideas
- Monitoring the group's success
- Holding other members accountable to be present and focused

Group expectations:

- Courageous ideas, flexible thinking, and multiple perspectives
- No small thinking, negativity, or comments that distract from the mission

WHAT ROLE DOES EACH INDIVIDUAL PLAY IN A THINK TANK?

Each person must commit to behaving in a manner that furthers group outcomes. Throughout the think-tank process, each person must monitor whether their own contributions and behaviors reflect those expected of members.

- Come prepared—organize your thoughts in advance to maximize value and impact.
- Carefully select the language and vocabulary you use when proposing an idea or making a point.
- Don't feel personally attached to your ideas.
- Be willing to be wrong.
- Encourage others to challenge and improve your ideas.
- Be a reflective responder by listening to others to understand and further the conversation, not to just offer a response.
- Resolve personal issues beforehand.
- Come with the mindset that issues you may have won't affect the meeting or the success of the group.
- Address individual and collective behaviors that detract from the group's mission.
- Engage in conversation in a sincere, selfless manner.
- Have an open mind.
- Serve the best interests of the group, not of any individual.

WHAT MUST A TEAM DO TO ENSURE THAT THINK TANKS ARE EFFECTIVE & EFFICIENT?

Teams must make sure that they meet the following conditions for the think tank to operate effectively and efficiently:

- Receive training and understand the guidelines for operating as a think tank
- Be comprised of diverse thinkers
- Set a goal and purpose for the meeting, and identify outcomes
- Identify a member to record the meeting and to share the information with other members after the meeting
- Establish a start and end time
- Adhere to the meeting's goals
- Actively monitor whether time is used efficiently
- Identify all possibilities by asking, "What if?" and "Why not?"
- At the end of the meeting, reflect on its quality and efficiency by asking what went well and what can be done better next time



OPERATING A THINK TANK

The members of a think tank must engage in behaviors that are essential to its success during five stages of participation:

1 APPROACHING THE MEETING

- Research the topic
- Determine the reason for the meeting
- Set the agenda
- Brainstorm potential solutions and your individual contribution
- Engage in necessary pre-conversations
- Determine what it will look like when the task is completed
- Consider who is involved
- Determine what a win or loss looks like
- Consider the meeting's setting
- Prepare for your individual role
- Ensure that you can be present and focused from start to finish
- Establish goals for your own participation
- Identify any personal or interpersonal situations that would limit your full participation

2 RIGHT BEFORE THE MEETING

- Ensure that you've prepared necessary materials and have what you need to be a contributing member
- Finalize your personal contributions
- Determine what role you are expected to play and need to play during the meeting
- Review your understanding of the meeting
- Be on time
- Be mindful of your personal goals
- Prepare yourself to appropriately handle any personal or interpersonal issues
- Don't prejudge or have predetermined expectations for the meeting
- Come with an open mind

3 DURING THE MEETING

- Arrive on time
- Follow the agenda
- Set goals
- Minimize personal distractions
- Remind everyone of the mission
- Be mindful of your own participation
- Don't push your own agenda
- Identify next steps, a timeline, and obstacles
- Clarify tasks and roles
- Identify costs and risks
- Question and improve the ideas of others
- Have a spirited dialogue
- Anticipate the impact
- Identify various solutions
- Share new and thoroughly considered ideas
- Stay until the end

4 AFTER THE MEETING

- Disseminate meeting notes to all members
- Keep the information in a location that everyone can access
- Reflect on your own participation and ask yourself, or others, how you performed during the meeting
- Identify ways that you were successful and ways you would have liked to improve your participation
- Schedule time to take the actions that you personally agreed to undertake
- Don't complain

5 BEFORE THE NEXT MEETING

- Complete your individual tasks
- Determine the return on investment and evaluate how things are going based on the goals that were set during the meeting
- Don't undermine the decisions that were made
- Continue to reflect on your participation and identify ways to refine it and improve

