

Leading the Work by Doing the Work

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The experience of everyone who has coached or participated in a Critical Friends Groups (CFG) suggests that the support of the school principal is an important factor in implementing and sustaining CFGs. In fact this was one of the findings of the very first study carried out around NSRF work (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). This study found that, "Principals who failed to actively support the work of CFGs were the greatest hindrances to their success." However, as often happens, this study, raised other important questions.

One question was, "How could principals who work in very fragmented, isolated, competitive ways ever learn to value and support the collaborative, reflective, learning-centered work that happens in CFGs?" Two groups of school leaders whose work I have documented have tried a very simple answer to this question: They learned about CFG work by doing it themselves.

The District Team

The first study focused on one suburban district's administrative team (superintendent, assistant superintendents, principals, and directors – 19 members). The superintendent, frustrated by the lack of collaboration and focus on issues of teaching and learning on the administrative team, convened the team in a monthly CFG-like format. The group used the Collaborative Assessment Conference as a vehicle to look at student work, raise issues of teaching learning and connect those issues to administrative practice. A National Facilitator agreed to coach the group, and I documented the work. The goal was to meet in this format for one school year.

The first meeting confirmed the superintendent's notion that the group was neither collaborative nor focused on teaching and learning. The group was clearly meeting only at the insistence of the superintendent, and was suspicious both of the facilitator and my documentation of the work. Nor was the group particularly interested in issues of teaching and learning. Comments such as "Principals negotiate their contracts individually here and there is a history of distrust" and "There is talk about instructional leadership, but principals are not instructional leaders, and should not try to

be" were typical in the first meeting.

Despite the lack of trust, and collaborative and reflective capacity, the group began to use the Collaborative Assessment Conference to look at student work. Initially, the group struggled with the protocol. However, by the third session, the group had learned the protocol and comments such as "I find the process beginning to work," "Today's efforts were well focused and felt easier than previous sessions" and "Good process involving nearly everyone" began to surface. In the fourth session, three principals talked about using the Collaborative Assessment Conference in their own schools. Surprisingly, in the seventh and last session of the year, the group agreed to continue to meet and to use the Consultancy Protocol to look at their leadership practice.

During the second year, the group stumbled again as it learned the new protocol but by the third session, the feedback was very positive. Comments such as "Working together on a real system issue was good," "This type of discussion would be great if it could be expanded throughout the system"

and "We were able to openly share differing ideas and to respectfully listen to each other" were common.

Overall, the study found that over time, the team learned to use the protocols efficiently and productively, the facilitator gave fewer and fewer instructions, and the feedback was increasingly positive. Importantly, the team agreed to both continue the work a second year and five of the members of the team used the protocols in some way in their schools. An administration of the Team Learning Survey (Dechant & Marsick) at the end of the first and second years confirmed that the team had indeed become more collaborative and reflective. However, the study also found important limits to this team learning because some members were clearly more positive about this work than others and some members began the work in their own schools while others did not. Three principals remained steadfastly resistant.

The results suggested that these limits (continued on page 16)

How could principals who work in very fragmented, isolated, competitive ways ever learn to value and support the collaborative, reflective, learning-centered work that happens in CFGs? They learned about CFG work by doing it themselves.

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(continued from page 8)

were connected to (1) the isolated and fragmented nature of the team; (2) the power of the isolated, competitive culture in which the leaders worked; and (3) the behavior of the superintendent who, in effect, had ordered the team to be more collaborative. Simply put, the team had a long way to go to become a professional learning community and ordering them to go there, only got them part of the way.

The TILE CFG

The context of the second study is quite different. In this study, 14 graduates of a M.Ed. Leadership program met in a CFG. The group had been trained in a two year, cohort-based M.Ed. program called the TILE program (Teacher Initiative for Leadership in Education) which was very much based on ideas of critical friendship, and used protocols as the central element of its pedagogy. The group was multi-district, regionally based and completely voluntary.

The TILE CFG has met continuously since fall 2004. Because the group was trained in the use of protocols as part of their leadership education program, they used many more protocols than the district group, facilitated the conversation themselves, had no difficulty bringing dilemmas of practice, student work or relevant texts to the table, and in the third year agreed on a focus of difficult conversations, especially as they related to equity.

In a series of interviews, the members of the group stated that the TILE CFG continued to support their own leadership learning and their ability to bring this perspective back to their own schools. One principal summed up the experience by saying:

You have to trust in the group. I knew that when I missed CFG meetings, I was really missing something. I think it was the honest, truthful conversations, and knowing that you had a voice. I don't always feel I have these in my own district.

Another added:

For me, the CFG groups are places where you can test your hypotheses. It is the safest place. I do not know any other place where I can do that. I cannot do that with my staff. I cannot do it with my boss. And the only place where you will be taken seriously in this way is the CFG. School is a lonely place with regards to this type of conversation.

In general, the principals recounted how the

only way that they could ever hope to support and sustain professional collaborative communities in their schools was to participate in one themselves. Comments such as, "In this job you can go weeks without this type of conversation" and "Now I have a place to come and hash things out. The CFG almost has a spiritual quality" were common.

During the interview process, the principals were also asked about the connections between their work in their CFG and their work in schools. In the interviews, every group member gave numerous examples of how their participation in the TILE CFG sustained and informed their leadership practice. The examples fell into three broad areas. First, members shared how the TILE CFG continually refocused them on larger issues of school culture and professional community, encouraging them to look beyond the immediate problems that they faced as school leaders. Second, the principals described specific structures, tools or practices that were used in the TILE CFG, tools that they also used, in some way, in their schools. Finally, three members of the group from the same district recounted the effect that having TILE CFG colleagues in their district had on the work of the district administrative team.

One principal, for example, described how the TILE CFG supported her persistent focus on teaching and learning by saying, "Are kids learning or are we just teaching? You have to create that culture where you can have conversations around instruction." Another noted, "It is about always bringing the conversation about teaching and learning. It is about building a CFG language with the staff." Every CFG member identified a connection between the culture of the TILE CFG and the culture they were trying to build in their schools.

The administrators were also able to provide many examples of tools, protocols and ideas that were used in the TILE CFG that they also used in their practice. Some examples were using the Collaborative Assessment Conference to look at student work, collaborative data analysis sessions, using a Tuning Protocol to look at a crisis plan, and reflective journaling. One principal described the progress she had made in her school by saying, "But you learn. You have to do it. But I am to the point that we have made some progress. In my school, we have

introduced norms for (continued on page 17)

our work, use essential questions to drive faculty meetings and collaboratively examine data." Another principal described a more ambitious use of the CFG ideas, "I decided that my approach was to run my faculty meeting as a CFG."

Two principals depicted two very powerful examples of connections between the TILE CFG and the leadership practice of the district administrative team. In the first example, one principal explained how a presentation that she made about her CFG work influenced how the district administrative team functioned. She explained the connection in this way:

I made a presentation about CFGs to the district leadership team. I presented on CFGs and PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). We first did a Chalk Talk; I talked about National School Reform Faculty and the components of a CFG. We did a Consultancy about a professional dilemma presented by one of the principals. We did a check in. We ended with a closure piece. Ultimately, what happened was the Assistant Superintendent decided that the district leadership team meetings would be run as a CFG. Throughout the year, principals brought student work, a dilemma or a text based discussion to the meeting. They still do it today. This year, the principals are running their grade level meetings as CFGs.

A second connection to district leadership practice surfaced because one district had hired three TILE CFG members as elementary principals. These three principals explained that having three TILE principals - out of six elementary principals in the district - eased their transition into the district and changed the conversation and practice on the district team. One principal described the effect,

Before my TILE CFG colleagues arrived, the previous superintendent tried to get conversations about teaching and learning going on the leadership team. He tried to do a book study on Good to Great (Collins, 2001). They rode him out of town. But now it makes a difference with three of us who understand the value of this work.

In general, the TILE CFG members saw a number of very strong connections between the work of the TILE CFG and their leadership practice.

Summary

In summary, these two studies describe, in

two different contexts, one way school leaders can learn to value and support CFG work in their schools. Simply put, supportive school leaders do the work for themselves. In the first study, a district team made significant gains towards becoming a more reflective, collaborative learning community, and to a lesser extent transferred some of that learning to their leadership practice. In the second study, a group which had a more robust understanding of CFG work created and sustained a leadership CFG, whose work then influenced their work as school leaders.

The comparison of the two studies, however, opens up other dilemmas. The district team was coerced by the superintendent to do collaborative work, and although it took a great deal of support and good facilitation, the power of the work eventually began to get some traction and show some results. Because the group was made up of an entire district team, the potential benefit to the district and the district's children seems much greater than in the second group whose members were much more skilled, but from a variety of districts. The next challenge is to figure out a way to leverage professional community building on a district and regional level. Our second regional TILE CFG started in October. I will keep you posted ■

Bibliography

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- These studies are available on the NSRF website, at www.nsrffharmony.org

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