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## PROTOCOLS: The Missing Puzzle Piece for Teacher Leaders in PLCs

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For the past six summers, I have taught a graduate course on teacher leadership to a group of practicing K-12 teachers from a high-performing school district in Austin, Texas. The course is part of a specialized master's degree program that was co-developed by the school district and the university where I teach. The goal of the degree and, in particular, the course, is to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to serve as teacher leaders on their campuses. The district's forward-thinking superintendent hopes that the teacher leaders will return to their campuses after completing the degree and facilitate ongoing, high-quality professional development among colleagues. To this end, teachers in my course study the basics of teacher leadership; the teacher leadership standards; adult learning theory; and several models of professional development, including action research, peer coaching, and professional learning communities (PLC). The teachers' culminating project is to develop a plan for implementing a PLC when they return to their schools in the fall.

Over the years, I have noticed that the teachers easily grasp the big ideas associated with PLCs. For example, they pick topics relevant to their school context, such as teaching the whole child and integrating iPads into the curriculum. They select well-researched electronic and print materials to use in the PLCs; and, more importantly, they maintain an intense, laser-like focus on increasing the already high student achievement that occurs on their campuses. Despite these successes, though, the teachers struggle to develop the individual steps of the PLC meetings. They are experts at planning powerful lessons for their K-12 students, but they are uncertain about designing and facilitating meetings to foster professional development for themselves and their colleagues. This feeling is understandable because the teachers at this point are still novices at leading professional development activities. As I've observed these teachers in action, I have realized specifically that they don't know how to talk about their own teaching or how to offer feedback to their colleagues. To give them more opportunities to cultivate these leadership and facilitation skills, I place them in mock PLC meetings during my course.

As their professor, I sought information that would hopefully address this need and provide them with more specifics on how to talk about teaching. During my search I discovered the website for the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) ([www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org)) and its training opportunities. The idea of protocols intrigued me, and I wondered if they might be the missing puzzle piece to my challenge. This past spring, I attended the five-day workshop on protocols in Bloomington, Indiana. At the conclusion of this incredible workshop, I felt energized and excited about integrating protocols into my teacher leadership course.

### Protocol: Forming Ground Rules

This past summer, I taught the protocol-infused version of my teacher leadership course for the first time. After I introduced the idea of protocols to the teachers during the first lesson, we jumped right in and used the protocol entitled "Forming Ground Rules," which Marylyn Wentworth developed and pub-

lished. To prepare the teachers for the protocol, I asked them to recall previous meetings they had attended. We discussed why the meetings were successful or unsuccessful. To engage them more deeply, I encouraged them to think about the ways that they, as practicing teachers, implement and manage cooperative learning activities with their K-12 students. The protocol for forming ground rules relates closely to these two scenarios.

Next, I used a Power Point slide show to guide them through the steps of the protocol; and, as we talked, I recorded the teachers' ideas on a dry-erase board. The teachers generated the following ground rules:

1. Exhibit a positive and constructive attitude; be encouraging and motivating; celebrate success
2. Respect others' opinions; act respectfully to others
3. Listen when colleagues are speaking; monitor side conversations
4. Don't be afraid to disagree respectfully
5. Monitor your air time; don't talk too much, and don't be too quiet; stay on topic
6. Try to help others
7. Be prepared with your work; contribute; be responsible; be cognitively present
8. Be flexible; dare to leave your comfort zone
9. Monitor your technology use; refrain from texting

When the teachers later reflected on the protocol for forming ground rules, they concluded that using it had been helpful. A teacher wrote, "Everyone who was participating knew what was expected of them and what would not be tolerated. The rules reduced some of the stress that can come from a group meeting. I also liked that the ground rules were established by the people participating in the group and not from an administrator telling them how to act." Another teacher added, "This was a good way for a group to agree on rules for a meeting. The protocol helped us to feel that we were important and that we would all be taken seriously and treated with respect. It helped to set boundaries." A third teacher stated, "This protocol encourages everyone within the group to share his/her needs in an open and honest atmosphere. I like that everyone has a voice."

### **Protocol: Success Analysis**

Later in the semester, we tried another protocol. Since the teachers had expressed an interest in developing a PLC that focused on sharing effective teaching strategies, we employed the protocol entitled "Success Analysis Protocol," which the field educators affiliated with NSRF developed. The purpose of this protocol is for the presenter and supporting group of colleagues to analyze a success and determine why it differs from routine work. For homework preceding the class, the teachers created a one-page overview of a favorite lesson. At the start of the class, I introduced the protocol to the teachers by modeling each step and providing a handout for reference. After randomly placing

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teachers in groups of three, I guided them through the process step by step. I monitored the time and projected the correct step on an overhead screen. This approach freed the teachers to focus on the protocol and allowed me to support any who might struggle.

The success analysis protocol was successful, pun intended. A teacher reflected, “I liked the opportunity to talk about my lesson and just talk without being interrupted. The listeners were simply listening and then talking about what they heard me say. Sometimes things come across differently when people tell you what they heard. This is a good way to hear constructive criticism.” Another teacher explained, “This protocol allowed us to share ideas in a manner that was easy and fun. I like this protocol because we had to decide what information was vital to the lesson.”

Two problems arose while implementing the protocol. First, I erred in reducing the amount of time for each step, and, as a result, the teachers felt rushed and were unable to explore the lessons in depth. As the protocol directions recommend, group members need at least 20 to 30 minutes to share and analyze each lesson. I gave each teacher only 15 minutes, and this amount of time was too short. Second, different personality types responded differently to the protocol. When the teachers reflected at the end of the lesson, they stated that the protocol altered their normal communication style and caused discomfort. An extroverted teacher wrote, “It was very difficult to control my mouth and not ask questions during the presentation!” During the same debriefing a quiet teacher wrote, “For me, it was hard to just keep talking about my lesson. I’m not one to just keep talking. When I’m done saying what I have to say, that’s it.” The teachers concluded that the protocols provide structure to the conversations and, at times, force speakers and listeners out of their comfort zones and typical patterns of behavior. As the professor, I see that when introducing the protocol in the future I need to emphasize that it may affect their typical communication style and cause mild frustration.

In closing, the summer course has ended, and these aspiring teacher leaders have now settled comfortably into a new school year. As they sched-

ule their upcoming PLCs, they begin with a solid understanding of the big ideas of teacher leadership, adult learning theory, and professional development. The teachers know the procedures for implementing PLCs in their schools as well as the reasons for implementing them, which include focusing on student achievement, talking about teaching, sharing successful strategies, and developing camaraderie with colleagues in an intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive environment. I am optimistic that this year will be more successful than previous ones because this group is now equipped with specific steps they can take in their learning groups. Their newly acquired knowledge of protocols will hopefully be the missing puzzle piece for teacher leaders of PLCs.

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