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When Trainings Go Somewhere Different, or, 'I Don't Think We're In Kansas Anymore'

By Terry Daugherty, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Indiana tdaugher@mccsc.edu

I found myself in a nightmare of a situation. Like one of those college dreams, where you find yourself late for a test, and no way to get to class.

I had traveled across the country to facilitate a Critical Friends Group Coaches Training. My communication with the organizers had been, at best, incomplete. I really did not know who I was training, nor did I know the organization's nor any individual's goals or hopes, why they'd selected CFG training, nothing. And when I got there, I found out the participants were just as uninformed as I was.

One of the great experiences of taking CFG training is the growth and connectedness that all participants feel by the end of the training. But that fantastic experience requires a lot of preparation on the facilitator's part. As I prepare for a training, I typically feel a mixture of panic and responsibility. The panic increases in direct correlation to the lack of connection with the organizers ahead of time.

A good meeting or training facilitator will do many hours of planning to match the correct set of experiences, texts, and activities with the group they will be training.

The first day is usually about bringing the individuals together and helping them to practice listening and collaborating with each other. As the days pass, protocols and activities will hopefully give them an understanding of how to improve their teaching or administrative practices. The goal – make their practice public to others by meeting in a CFG,

and use protocols to give equal voice to each other in supporting each other's professional growth and development.

So, here I am, far from home, in a training where I discovered on the first day these things:

1. The group didn't know why we were doing this training.
2. They didn't know much about each other's work, even though they all worked out of the same office.
3. They didn't know what they didn't know.
4. They were experiencing the results of a lot of invisible hierarchy within their office.
5. Some group members were major, vocal skeptics during the whole first day.

Realization: I had no idea what to do with the rest of the week!

I went back to my room after the first day of training and looked at my five-day plan. I wanted to tear it up, throw it out, and start over. Then, I made a crucial decision for the week. I decided that this group, more than they could realize, NEEDED to experience basic CFG practice through experiencing the protocols in training, step by step.

Our second day together focused on learning how to give and receive feedback effectively, and doing some Tuning protocols. Through the process, the group learned so much about each other, they demanded to interrupt the agenda for the day and work on all of the new-found responsibilities they were learning

about each other! I held them off.

An important detail about this group that I hadn't mentioned yet: they do Professional Development with educators too. They know P.D. techniques and experiences thoroughly. They travel the country, like me, giving and receiving Professional Development. They looked at this NSRF CFG training like a CSI pathologist looks at a victim. Because of this perspective, they asked me to do the “unholy” to the “holy.” ***They wanted permission to interrupt each protocol as we were running it.*** When we were doing a protocol for the first time, they wanted to halt it at any time and ask why I was facilitating in a certain way. I understood that they had a different view about the process and so I met them in the middle. I asked them to write their questions on Post-it Notes and I would pause at the end of each section of a protocol and go through the questions that came up. (*Editor's note: Although Terry's adaptation is not recommended for most groups, he was beautifully following his own internal Mindful Facilitator wisdom.*)

The third day of training, we worked on dilemma protocols, which led to more frustration as members of the group discovered so much more content of their work lives that needed work. I was taken aside that day by a very wise person and asked what my plans were for the rest of the week. This wise participant suggested that it would be useless to continue the training along its typical agenda. I agreed.

That night, I rewrote the last two days' agenda entirely. Instead of facilitating the rest of a typical training, I put on my coaching hat, and led this group as if it was a CFG that I belonged to. My thinking switched from, “What do I need to do to move them toward becoming facilitators?” to “What do I need to do to help my CFG?”

I want to thank the staff in the NSRF office for their help and guidance along this path of changing the training. I always find them invaluable as a resource for preparing and conducting a training. In this case they were essential.

The next day we did an ATLAS Looking at Data Protocol to honor the need to look at their own research and feedback data. Then we began to use that protocol to delve into their work. We did the following things:

- We went into a protocol to tease out the different

issues the group needed to work on using an Affinity Protocol.

- Once issues were defined we prioritized which of the issues could and should be worked on.
- Next, we selected who should be working on the issues identified.
- Our next task was to begin to plan what work to do on these issues. Each group used a Futures Protocol to do this. These issues were so immediate to the group, they only went in the future 6 months in order to plan backwards.
- Their next step was to do a NSRF Creating Action Plan.
- When that was complete, we used an NSRF Group Agenda Planning for the next meeting that each group would have.
- We shared our Action Plans and Agendas.
- The training was done.

Time was up and it was time to go home.

The hard-right-turn of the last few days' work brought a completely different dimension to my training, profoundly different from other trainings I've conducted over the years. I learned there was more than one way to do a training. I also realized that although there are many trainings that don't go where you think they will, it's imperative to not give up on the process. It was important that we had the protocol and facilitating experience, but so was meeting the group's needs. Through this experience, I hope they discovered the power of Critical Friends Groups in improving professional practice and I hope they seek out more opportunities to use and be trained in more NSRF protocols. I definitely learned the absolute imperative of knowing a group's goals for a training before planning the event. Lastly, now I also know that if a group doesn't know what they hope to get out of a training, the agenda will change as their goals begin to surface.

I believe the lessons I learned through this training also apply to other group experiences, not just CFG trainings. We indeed “went someplace different,” but the protocols still provided a clear map to a solution.

