

The National School Reform Faculty® (NSRF®) publishes the Connections newsletter six times per year. To suggest a topic or submit an article, email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org or call 812-334-8379.

From the Director

Mindful Facilitation Transforms Classes, Meetings and Trainings

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF® Director, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG® Coach in Indiana, michele@nsrfharmony.org

Like me, I'm sure that you have also experienced the dreaded "meeting (or workshop, planning session, etc...) gone wrong." Perhaps the person who was leading the meeting didn't seem in control. There was no obvious structure that supported dealing with the subject at hand. Only a third of the people present were heard and the meeting ended without concrete action steps. On the other hand, maybe the leader was so focused on set time limits and the original agenda, that decisions were made hastily and left the majority of the group feeling frustrated and powerless.

When I began my career as a facilitator, I had the good luck to work around many "master" facilitators. They made the process look so easy. I would marvel at their skills at structuring meetings, creating an atmosphere of safety and trust, giving the opportunity for all voices to be heard and honored and moving the group toward a conclusion that felt satisfying for all. I took copious notes and eagerly embarked on my own facilitation journey. Although I did not realize it then, I began to cultivate a habit of mindful facilitation.

So, what is mindful facilitation? Mindfulness has been defined as paying attention in a particular way. It is an intentional, moment-to-moment awareness that is nonjudgmental, curious, and open. Mindful facilitators develop active, engaged listening skills that allow them to be tuned into the group and its needs. Cultivating an attitude of "compassionate unattachment" is essential for the mindful facilitator. She realizes that her job is to meet the needs of the group, not to push her own agenda. If a facilitator's heart, as well as her head, can hold everyone's needs, opinions, ideas, thoughts, emotions, etc... and remain personally unattached to the outcome, then she is much more likely to be accepted as a neutral third party who is working for the good of the group.

When at her best, the mindful facilitator is passionate, dispassionate, and compassionate all at the same time. She is full of energy, unattached to outcomes, and genuinely wants the best for each individual, as well as the group as a whole. The mindful facilitator respectfully honors a variety of perspectives, and calmly and confidently roleplays appropriate risk taking behaviors that encourages others to do the same. This paves the way for members of the group to be more honest and open, without having to be defensive when others think and feel differently.

So what can you do to become more of a mindful facilitator? I respectfully offer these suggestions:

1. **Know your role.** Your job is to move a process forward, not to push your own

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agenda, inject your opinions and ideas, or seek any one particular outcome. In other words, your role is not to solve the problem. It is to objectively (re)state opinions, suggestions, and feelings, to ask clarifying and probing questions that push people to reexamine their own beliefs, to help them focus so that they can clearly articulate their thoughts, or push their thinking into new directions. Participants allow you to do this because you are a neutral, yet caring, third party.

2. Provide structure. Although you believe that a group can collaboratively come up with its own solutions, mindful facilitators know that a structure is needed. Without one, there will be no guardrails to keep the process from meandering onto non-productive paths, speeding haphazardly through dangerous conditions or taking a nose dive off a cliff altogether when emotions and passions run too high. Mindful facilitators know that groups need to be taken through a process of defining a problem, targeting the specific area that needs work, understanding specifics through the asking of clarifying and probing questions, taking time to silently reflect on possible solutions and the creating of actionable solutions based on the collaborative group process. Good Critical Friends Group coaches and facilitators know that the best way to do this is by using protocols and activities like those provided by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF).

3. Be flexible. As every good facilitator does, you've come up with an agenda and tailored it to fit the needs of the group you are working with. Every mindful facilitator knows that is just the first step. Mindful facilitators think on their feet. They are constantly adjusting time, structures, and focus, depending on what thoughts, feelings, ideas, or needs surface during the process. This means that mindful facilitators are not attached to using their "brilliant" agenda, but instead rely on the brilliance of a group in a collaborative process. It also means you really need to know your stuff!

4. Take, make and create time. This actually goes along with being flexible, but is important enough to have as a stand-alone topic. If you want something done well, it will take time, time that almost no one ever wants to give up. Although most people will acknowledge that good decisions might take a good deal of time to make, what they really want is instant gratification. It is your job to put forth a reasonable time frame for what needs to be accomplished. Remember that although each session has a beginning and ending time, everything to be addressed within that time frame may be adjusted or adapted to accommodate the priorities of the group as it moves along. Mindful facilitators know that important, emotionally charged topics may well take more than one session to reach resolution, and they will have to articulate the importance of this to the group. The use of reflective silence is a powerful tool. Mindful facilitators know when to take the time to use it! A few minutes of silent reflection time can be an effective way to regroup, calm things down when the atmosphere gets tense, or to help participants articulate their responses effectively, thereby saving a lot of time!

5. Be compassionate. Believe me, people know if you are truly working with their best interests at heart or are acting compassionate to mask a hidden agenda. Mindful facilitators listen to, acknowledge, and value feelings as much as opinions and ideas. They know that unless strong feelings are brought to the surface and worked through, collaboration will break down and prevent long-term, workable solutions from being made.



6. Don't take yourself too Seriously. Developing a light, humorous tone when appropriate can go a long way toward building relationships and creating buy-in to the process. A day-long event feels much, much longer if you never share a laugh. A mindful facilitator can laugh at herself and with others. Showing the group that you enjoy your job helps them to enjoy the process as well.

Obviously, experience is, perhaps, the best teacher of all. The mindful facilitator is always striving to improve. Seeking out constructive feedback on her performance not only gives her valuable information about how to hone her skills, but also models for the group how to skillfully accept well-intended feedback. Mindful facilitators each have their own style and should take time to develop it. Being authentic creates an atmosphere of trust. And remember, if a facilitator cultivates an attitude of mindfulness, she will plant the seeds in others to do the same.

Wishing you the the best possible start to the new semester and 2013,



Michele Mattoon
Director, NSRF



P.S. Please feel free to forward Connections to friends and colleagues, and suggest they [sign up for our Connections e-list!](#)



Hurry! Only a few seats still open at our Critical Friends Group New Coaches Open Training beginning Feb. 18-20*

Bloomington, Indiana, \$795 for five days' training
Visit the [NSRF website](#) for more details and to enroll.

Look what CFGs can do for your school:

- Help students succeed
- Model and build 21st Century Skills
- Build trust
- Reduce teacher and administrator isolation
- Change school culture
- Build diversity of thought
- Extend and share leadership
- Facilitate participation from all members
- Provide healthy challenges
- Foster equity
- Honor and prioritize time for deep reflection
- Support strategic planning
- Reveal solutions to complex dilemmas
- Develop critical problem-solving
- Encourage creative, new thinking (sometimes around old problems)
- Carefully analyze work, and support everyone in receiving and giving focused, actionable feedback

“I had huge misgivings about this training, one would even say resentment. It was based on past trainings that we encountered and took nothing from them. Most of these left me feeling powerless on staff.

“I must say this was entirely different. After a week of this training I feel we now have more tools to improve meetings, communication and the community at [my] school. Thank you so much. I now feel able to voice my concerns and dilemmas effectively. I also feel these protocols will make me a better member of [my] school. They will further my ability to teach my students as well.” -- A new CFG coach from Wisconsin

*First three days of a complete five-day training, final two days to be determined by participants

