Critical Friends Groups and NSRF protocols help transform The Bishop Strachan School culture

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The Bishop Strachan School, a 146 year-old Canadian day and boarding school for girls, has been in a change paradigm for more than a decade as we re-visioned the JK-to-12 curriculum and pedagogy and changed the culture of our learning community. The process led by visionary School Heads, a supportive Board of Governors, sophisticated strategic planning processes, generous professional development budgets and strong leadership within has been intentional, thoughtful, and very carefully scaffolded. 2012 was a watershed year as we saw the culmination of a number of initiatives that we had been building towards. Key among these initiatives was our work with The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) and introducing the use of protocols to our whole school community.

Partnerships with global organizations, in both our Junior and Senior Schools, professional readings of the work done by Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Harvard Rounds, The Coalition of Essential Schools, and High Tech High, all referenced the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) as an obvious next step in the journey for BSS. The Power of Protocols, required summer reading for the Academic Program Team (Lead Teachers and Department Heads), led two of our Lead Teachers to request funding to attend a NSRF Critical Friends Group (CFG) training session. Our Professional Growth Committee determined we could leverage the learning by holding the five-day workshop at BSS thereby building greater capacity. So, in the winter of 2012, 15 of our Academic Program Team completed training to become NSRF-certified CFG coaches.

New Coaches Training

The training was powerful, the most powerful PD ever attended, as many commented. CFG training also had an immediate and ongoing effect on the practice of the Academic Program Team as they began to introduce protocols to their departments and teaching teams for planning projects and examining student work. It quickly became apparent that we needed to train the entire Leadership Team as well as all faculty and staff if we, as a learning community, were to continue to move our strategic vision forward and build community.

In July, our entire Leadership Team, including our Head of School, spent three full days in NSRF training. Again, it was extremely effective, exceeding already high expectations. We were able to increase our skill-base as active listeners, observers, and facilitators, as

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Leadership Team Training

well as giving and receiving feedback. We learned to appreciate what each department was dealing with from a strategic perspective, built a common language, and recognized the value of diverse input as we brainstormed strategic challenges in a structured, professional manner. Most importantly, we became a focused and more productive leadership team.

We then continued the training with the entire faculty and staff over two days in our August Professional Development week using the same facilitator. At this point, given the size of the employee base (180), faculty and staff, we needed a large number of table coaches, but we were able to activate the staff who had previously been certified as CFG coaches in winter 2012. This became an advantage in that our entire staff was able to see the skills being used by their own colleagues. In addition, those who had been trained were able to move their skills to a higher level, with coaching and check-ins, while allowing BSS to contain costs. The feedback, once again, was overwhelmingly positive.

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All-school Training

Erin Mays, an administrative assistant noted, "The representation of differing members of our staff community [was] powerful and enabled multiple perspectives to be expressed and great outcomes achieved. It was very collegial and nicely scaffolded a horizontal workplace structure."

Many of us believe this training has been instrumental in transforming our school culture. We were able to build bonds between faculty and non-faculty as well as between departments in order to build community with a shared vision. Donna Jordan, a staff member in the Office of Philanthropy and Alumnae Relations commented, "It was really helpful to see that no matter what part of the school we belong to, everybody has sort of similar issues with juggling so much…after the training, people were much more open to saying 'Hello, how are you? ' and sticking their head in our office. It feels so much more connected." One of the teachers said simply, "This week, we shrunk the building" (James Stewart).

In building community, we gained an appreciation of each other's goals and dilemmas, and learned the value of diverse perspectives, while working through all kinds of strategic issues including and beyond classroom dilemmas. We then further leveraged our learning in November as we came together in the same cross-divisional integrated groupings to work on strategic issues. This time, however, the entire process was facilitated internally and led by our own Lead Mentor, Barb Bower, who was certified as a CFG coach in 2012.

The CFG Training and the dedicated time for protocols in November have helped teachers and staff use protocols productively and efficiently to address some of the dilemmas we face as our organization changes. Protocols and CFGs involve all sectors of our community in resolving these dilemmas and making plans for the future. Office Manager, Jennifer Dunbar said,

"They are a way to involve, engage and support each other across the school." Staff have also noted the efficiency of protocols, especially when working with several constituencies: "I got a lot more out of the combined collaborative group in a one-hour protocol than I would have if I had to meet with the different stake-holders separately" (Charlotte Fleming).

Janice Foster, our Middle School Student Life Coordinator was struggling with issues around the involvement of young students in service learning projects. She was hearing lots of complaints and getting plenty of advice from other teachers and parents, but she was perplexed by how to find the right experiences and help parents understand the situation. She decided to use a protocol and invited not only other faculty and staff who had faced similar situations, but Middle School parents, too. At the protocol, she asked, "how can we organize service learning opportunities for Middle School students that are age-appropriate and curriculum-related?" The experience generated new ideas for Janice, and helped bring parents into the process in a positive and respectful way with the added benefit of allowing them to see how we work.

Parental involvement

"I thought it was great to get the parents involved," Janice explained. "It was great to get their opinions, advice and ideas, but also for parents to see how a protocol actually works." The process was productive and efficient, too. "It amazed me how much information you get out of a one-hour conversation," Janice remarked. "And it was simpler than having individual conversations or reading dozens of emails."

Moira Dossetor, Executive Director, Office of Philanthropy and Alumnae Relations, took advantage of the all-staff CFG training and has started using protocols with her team. They were finding that research was taking a lot of time and effort but was not always yielding the key points the team needed, nor was it laid out in the most effective manner. The lead researcher used a protocol to bring his dilemma to the team and then listened to how the team used his research and heard their ideas for improvement. Moira says the protocol was particularly useful for the researcher: "Hearing all the knowledge around the table about the process, he got a deeper sense of how we use these things. Knowing that was important to him in helping him think about what he puts into it. I think it benefited him on that level and I think he has fine-tuned how he does it."

Rev. Cathy Gibbs and Krishpa Kotecha are the faculty advisors to the Wellness Council at BSS. The council has been very keen on developing a deeper understanding of bullying within the school across grades 7-12. One student took the initiative to develop a survey intended to gather data around the students'

perception of bullying, forms of bullying, and how it was occurring. However, the advisors felt that the survey lacked variety and depth. To deepen their questions, and ultimately, the data itself, they decided to use a protocol to gather ideas and insights from others. The protocol created a space where everyone's voice was respected and heard. Rev. Cathy pointed out, "Everybody had a voice in the process. Everybody participated. Every single person around that table said something. There wasn't anyone who said, too much and there wasn't anyone who said too little." The inclusion of all voices led to a better survey. "Our survey was ten-fold, twenty-fold better than what we started with," Krishpa added. "There was so much depth."

Bullying

Charlotte Fleming, Director of Service Learning was considering ways that she could gather feedback from the multiple stakeholders in her Service Learning program at BSS. Every year around the holiday season the school runs a Holiday Love Campaign where students, families, and a community partner come together to provide working-poor families a Christmas wish. Charlotte requested a protocol that would invite all the stakeholders in our school to help her expand the campaign and find ways to communicate the program's goals and expectations more accurately. She invited members from our parent, faculty, boarding, and Student Recruiting office to participate in this conversation. Charlotte noted, "The feedback, particularly from the parents and the non-teaching faculty that were involved in the protocol showed an incredible amount of learning that went on about the nature of our program."

Service learning

Indeed, helping us listen to each other respectfully and patiently has enabled us to really hear the dilemmas our colleagues face. Now we not only recognize that we all face similar challenges, but that we can contribute useful ideas, even when the presenter works in a very different area or department in the school. Lina Kim, School Data Administrator, commented that in her position it is not easy for her to know what is going on elsewhere in the school. However, through participating in protocols, she feels she can help others with their dilemmas. "You can have your opinion really open and give suggestions that your colleagues might really like." And as Donna Jordan points out, "We're all so nose-to-the-grindstone that sometimes you forget that there can be a bigger picture."

Moira Dossetor calls it "mutually reinforcing." She explains, "I think the people on the protocol teams that weren't in our area learned a lot about what we're doing. And

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people on my team really benefitted from hearing their perspective. There is a lot of depth and a lot of great ideas, and that creates mutual enthusiasm about what we are trying to do."

Deryn Lavell, Head of School, adds "School communities are by nature, complex and value-laden. Individual values may or may not be fully aligned with the values of the organization. This is not to say they must be entirely aligned in order to be a successful and forward-thinking community. Rather, there must be respectful dialogue, opportunities to problem solve, present dilemmas, and work together to harness different viewpoints into a more harmonious and strategic 'whole' for the vision of a School community to be realized. The use of protocols has indeed been transformative for our community to come together in order to be the best that we can be for our students and our vision."

Protocols, at heart, push transparency and help us tolerate discomfort. We use protocols to fulfill our ambition of becoming a true professional community—to incorporate best practices modeling collaboration, communication, citizenship, critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. At The Bishop Strachan School, NSRF training and protocols have given us a shape and a pattern with which we can continue refining our best practices and modeling behaviors we seek to instill in our students.

If you're interested in using NSRF protocols in similar ways to what The Bishop Strachan School has described here, please visit our website for information on training, email us for specific questions, or call our office at 812-330-2702 for a consultation.—editors