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What's the difference?

Using NSRF protocols vs. establishing a Critical Friends Group® community

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director

Many people know of NSRF® through the incredible library of protocols and activities that are available on our website—www.nsrff-harmony.org. Because most of our protocols and activities are freely offered, educators have used them for many years, sometimes without the benefit of Critical Friends Group® coaches training or the support of



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another person who has taken the training. While our policy of free access has certainly benefitted educators, it has sometimes caused confusion between using our protocols and intentionally improving individual practice and school culture through the use of Critical Friends Group (CFG™) communities.

Perhaps a good way to begin to sort out this difference is to define both protocols and Critical Friends Group communities.

Protocols...

A protocol is a structured process or set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning. Protocols give time for active listening and reflection so all voices in the room are heard and honored.

CFG communities...

A Critical Friends Group community is a particular variety of Professional Learning Community (PLC) so unique that we've registered it as a trade-

mark. CFG communities consist of 5-12 members who commit to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (protocols), who meet at least once a month for about two hours. Critical Friends Group coaches create an environment of trust that

allows participants to give and receive feedback most effectively, and to use our protocols and activities to help students – and teachers – create a culture of excellence.

CFG communities:

- » honor and prioritize time for deep reflection,
- » develop critical problem-solving,
- » build trust between colleagues,
- » reduce teacher and administrator isolation,
- » reveal solutions to complex dilemmas,
- » foster equity,
- » change school culture,
- » model and build 21st Century Skills

Most of all, CFG communities deeply support you and your colleagues working together to improve everyone's work and that of your students.

Over two decades ago, a group of educators was recruited to develop some structured tools to help educators nationwide continually improve their professional learning and develop best practices. This group eventually became the National School Reform Faculty. Every day we strive to fulfill our mission, *“empowering educators to create meaningful learning experiences for all by collaborating effectively in reflective, democratic communities that foster educational equity and social justice.”*

Notice that nowhere in the mission statement are protocols mentioned. This is because protocols are widely useful tools to get productive work done in efficient and effective ways, and CFG communities are only one place where that can happen.

Let’s explore why Critical Friends Group meetings (not just using protocols) are vital to the positive change of school culture.

Establishing a time and vehicle for continuous improvement acknowledges its value.

When institutions give time and money to something, its constituents understand the institution believes those things to be important. Schools and districts often say that they want faculty to continually improve their practice. However, unless the administration supports that statement with proper training (giving the staff the tools to improve) and sets aside time for the tools to be used productively, significant improvement is unlikely to occur.

Some school leaders say that this work is important so they find money to train people, but they don’t all understand that the training in itself is not enough. Administration must build time into the schedule for the newly trained coaches to lead this important work.

The converse doesn’t work, either. Setting aside “professional learning community” time without sending anyone to CFG coaches training may create a situation where teachers meet regularly, but noth-

ing substantive gets done. The PLCs create (or sometimes are handed) the goals, but without a CFG coach, the groups don’t have the vehicle to reach the goals. Without training, members of a PLC don’t know how they are supposed to talk about important issues, how to translate conversations into actions, how to feel safe enough to do the hardest, scariest work. Truly, the difference between a CFG and any other PLC is that, without a trained coach, a PLC does not have the necessary skills and tools to examine their work and the work of others.

However, once a school gets a critical mass of CFG coaches trained (one coach per 8-10 staff) and the coaches begin to consistently use that training in regular CFG session times, the work simply becomes part of a school’s culture—everyone expects to learn best practices throughout their career. Each individual improves their practice, protocol use spreads throughout the school, everyone learns better and accomplishes more in a shorter period of time.

Significant change takes time.

Many teachers will tell you how frustrating it is when new initiatives are introduced, only to be poorly implemented or completely abandoned six months later because they “weren’t working” or “didn’t show measurable positive results.” Significant change takes time. As CFG meetings become a regular, eagerly anticipated event on everyone’s calendar, their impact becomes deeper and more meaningful as time goes on. Schools who survey their CFG community members consistently find that many participants report a positive change already during the first year of implementation. Admittedly, the impact on markers like test scores may take longer to develop. We regret that we have no magic wand to change everything for the better immediately.

Members of CFG communities collaborate with their colleagues and work steadily through their entire careers to improve their practice. Using protocols during staff meet-

ings will make for a productive and efficient staff meeting. Using protocols to deeply look at and learn from student and adult work over a period of time in trusted CFG communities creates a stronger working environment, more satisfied teachers, and a better education for our students.

All members fully participate.

CFG communities are deliberately small enough so that all participants can participate. The ideal size is between 6-10 members. Everyone doing CFG work is expected to participate in two ways. One: they must give feedback on work that their critical friends bring to the meetings. Two: they must, at some point during the school year, bring a piece of their own work or their students’ work for the group to examine. In this way, no one can passively buy out. It’s true that everyone learns whenever anyone brings work to the table, but the deepest, most profound learning for one individual happens when the meeting focuses on that one person’s own dilemma or piece of work.

Everyone gives and receives feedback and everyone takes away valuable learning experiences no matter which role they happen to be in at that time. Everything done in a CFG meeting is about improving practice, although there are many choices as to what aspect of their practice that person is working on. Using protocols during a planning session may help show you steps detailing how to implement your plan, but it likely will not help you become a better teacher—but using protocols within a long-term, trusted CFG community will.

All teachers are leaders and must be responsible for their own learning.

“Teachers as leaders” is a phrase used a lot these days. Most use it to acknowledge that teachers are leaders in their classrooms and may take on other roles such as mentoring or coaching.

However, many schools and districts direct teachers to lead by guid-

ing their own learning—continuously trying new techniques, strategies, technology, and other tools in their classrooms. When a teacher belongs to a CFG community, participants commit to taking on this “learning leadership” role. Because of the trust built up in the group, all members can consistently work collaboratively to give each other honest feedback and informed ideas about how to improve their practice, how problems might be solved or new content created.

Again, this focus on adult learning is the crux of what makes using protocols in a CFG meeting different than using them in the classroom or at other meetings. CFG communities are the reliable space where adults learning together can turn education theories into practice and standards into actual student learning. They are about colleagues working together to improve their work and that of their students, continually striving for excellence through shared goals, norms and values.

Protocols = tools. Critical Friends Group = environment for improvement and cultural change.

Remember, protocols are simply tools that can be used to get collaborative work done efficiently and effectively, in meetings, classrooms, and elsewhere. Critical Friends Group meetings use protocols as a means to create an environment where all members work collaboratively to consistently improve their practice. When the majority of your educators participate in regular CFG meetings, that multitude of educators improving their individual practices results in improvement throughout the entire school or district. Everyone becomes more connected and collaborative in the meetings, and feels more empowered to learn and improve. Having gained the power to improve their own practice, the CFG members shift school culture positively. Protocols by themselves don't have that much power for organizational change.

For more info, see our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) and our [Self-Guided Tour to CFG Work](#). 

Sharpen your facilitation skills, and improve student achievement AND school culture through CFG training!

Sign up for spring or summer Critical Friends Group® New Coaches Open Trainings

Current options:

March 9-11 in Orlando, FL Last two days TBD by participants

June 22-26 in Nashville, TN

July 6-10 in Los Angeles, CA

July 13-17 in Bloomington, IN

Trainings this spring and beyond include our updated coaches training manual, with new and improved protocols and activities!



Rave reviews:

“Best PD EVER!”

“Informative! Educational! Protocols I can use frequently in my work.”

“...the protocols are really useful in bringing out our ‘best selves.’ They drew me into the activities in a way that nudged me towards being fully present. I developed a greater awareness of the effect of my behavior and how it might benefit or hurt the rest of the participants.”

To enroll or learn more, click through to the [NSRF website](#) or call 812-330-2702!