

From the Assistant Director's Blog

Core qualities of CFG work

As co-editor of the *Critical Friends Group Coaches' Handbook* and co-editor for our updated protocols and activities, I have spent a lot of time trying to recognize and distill the most crucial messages that new coaches need to learn about any given protocol, and around CFG work as a whole. I've been collecting notes and will be soliciting input on some new books for our members, coaches, and National Facilitators, and I thought it might be helpful in the meantime to share a few truisms I've learned in CFG Coaches' Trainings. Readers of *Connections* who've worked with me directly will likely remember hearing me say one or more of them (maybe more than once in a given week!), as I think they're key elements to the work.

Critical friends do not criticize or sit in judgment of one another. In our CFG meetings, we develop friendships that go beyond the superficial or personal, and help our friends in critical, important, often urgent situations related to our work. The foundation of all CFG work is the trust created within the group, the way we transform ourselves and our coworkers from congenial relationships to collegial ones—we move beyond simply “being friendly” to one another, to truly helping one another grow professionally and improve each of our practices.

There's a huge difference between “working the protocols” in random meetings and “doing CFG work” within an ongoing community of the same people gathered together regularly to do this work. Sure, individual protocols can be very helpful in all sorts of situations, but the really deep work happens within CFG meetings.

In a trusted CFG, we all “own” ALL of our problems, including

those presented by our peers.

We don't judge others in the group because we trust each other to be vulnerable together. If I've brought my own dilemma or piece of work to the group and the CFG coach has followed the protocol and protected my space, then nothing but good comes as a result. And once I've experienced that, I will support the same non-judgmental perspective when each of you bring your work.

Luci Englert McKean is the Assistant Director of the NSRF, Managing Editor of Connections, an NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach. Prior to joining NSRF, she curated three TEDxBloomington conferences and had a full career in marketing and copywriting. Email her at luci@nsrfharmony.org.

Even if I haven't trusted the group enough yet to bring my own piece of work, I can see on the faces of presenters how they feel as a result of a protocol: the evidence of trusting the group and the protocols is right in front of me. Almost inevitably, when someone brings “big work” to the meeting, we will check back with them in future meetings or in the teacher's lounge: “How's that thing going for you now that we've run the protocol last month?” We want to know that our collective input has had a positive impact on their problem. “Their” problem feels like “ours.”

When listening to a problem being presented in a CFG meeting, we recognize the distress or concern the presenter feels about it. In response, we think about all the friendships and relationships we've had throughout our lives, and so we want to help our Critical Friend feel better. Likely, the presenter in our

CFG meeting teaches in our school, and possibly any students they're describing were once “our own” students. Our gut tells us to think quickly, wanting to help them feel better, we leap to try to solve problems. And if no apparent solution leaps to mind, we still want to help them feel better, so we sympathize, if not empathize. However, we've learned ...

Go slowly to move fast. NSRF protocols slow down and subvert our instinctive response to soothe by attempting to solve a problem immediately, instead helping us all think more deeply about the problem at hand first. The protocols developed by NSRF have been in place for more than 20 years, and yet the research outlined in the 2011 bestseller, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by the Nobel prizewinner Daniel Kahneman, confirms that the benefits of “System 2,” slower, more deliberative, and more logical thinking brings better results than “System 1” thinking, which is fast, instinctive and emotional.

By taking the time to work the steps of each protocol with fidelity, we accomplish so much more. One of the most powerful and most-used debrief questions is, “How did the results of this protocol compare with other conversations or meetings you've had around this issue?” Almost inevitably, the answer is that previous conversations went around in circles or went off on tangents, and that most meetings last far longer with less results than following the right protocol for a problem.

Our job is not to hand anyone a solution, but to help the presenter think about the situation differently so they can find their OWN best solution. I think most of us, especially at the beginning of

our work using NSRF protocols in CFG communities, “want the cookie.” We want our perspective, our suggestion, to be the magical, unique, perfect solution for a given presenter’s problem. We wait for the moment in the debrief in which the presenter says, “Wow, when you said that thing, I knew it was exactly what I needed to hear! I can solve this problem now!” We wait for the opportunity to reply, aloud or in our head, “Hurray! I win the cookie! I had the “right answer!”

The more diverse the group, the richer the results. People are so accustomed to meeting with their like-colleagues (same grade level, same subject matter, same school), that they tend to believe that people who teach entirely different sorts of students will not be helpful to “my problems,” much less that people who are not classroom educators might be helpful. We underestimate the value that a completely different perspective will bring us. We’re shocked when we gain powerful new insights into our problem when, for instance, a school-bus driver gives us insight into how a particular student arrives each morning, or hidden-to-us information about that student’s extracurriculars, or the visible consequences of high schools starting classes before daylight. Eureka! Similarly, techniques that are common in early elementary classes, that were never taught to secondary teachers, can profoundly affect classroom management. Even having a CFG member, coach, or facilitator completely outside of the education field can provide “out of the box” thinking that unlocks what has felt like a completely unsolvable puzzle.

CFG work does not require “expertise,” only fidelity to the protocols and the agreements. I think some of the reasons that many teachers, especially new teachers, have felt so isolated in their roles is because they neither want their subject matter and curriculum dictated to them, nor do they want their

techniques questioned. Thus, they do not want to reveal their work, especially the “unpretty” aspects of their work to their colleagues. Autonomy is a powerful driver for professionals of any stripe, so CFG participants are invited to bring work rather than required to bring *particular* pieces of work.

The beauty of CFG meetings is that every one in the group agrees to provide thoughtful perspectives on the problem presented in each protocol; whether we have expertise in that subject area or not, we are all committed to our own learning and that of the students we serve.

When you don’t know what to offer, try converting a probing question into a “wondering.”

I’ve learned that when I’m sitting in a protocol around a subject area far outside my comfort zone, rather than staying silent and repeatedly “passing,” I can usually glance at some probing questions prompts and convert one of them into a “wondering.” Since developing strong probing questions takes practice, and since many attempts at good probing questions are actually thinly disguised suggestions, I thought the reverse—converting questions into suggestions—would be a powerful learning for me as well as unlock some new ideas for the presenter. Or maybe not

When providing feedback to a presenter in the course of a protocol, you should expect that 70-95% of what you mention may be unhelpful to the presenter. Depending on how long the presenter has been trying to solve this problem, they’ve likely tried a LOT of possible solutions already. So bear in mind that what you mention may have already been tried, or the presenter considered and rejected it for a reason not explicit in the presentation. (I’d love data around this question!)

However, it is the collective responsibility of everyone in the group

to speak their best thoughts aloud, even if they imagine their idea to be “too obvious” or “too wacky.” I’ve sometimes predicated my suggestion with a similar disclaimer: “This may be too ‘out there,’ but what if....?” and sometimes the look on the presenter’s face gives me the “cookie” I still enjoy, even if I’m not so hungry for it in every session. At any rate, if the group as a whole doesn’t plow through that vast majority of unusable feedback, you can’t trust that the 5-30% of “Aha!” content will be revealed. Also, even if your suggestions are not necessarily helpful to the presenter, they may very well be helpful to someone else in the group with a similar problem, or they may be just the clue to give someone else a completely new idea.

And now, my “big reveal.”

Although I’ve been a CFG coach for more than six years, my writings are helping me finalize the requirements for becoming an NSRF National Facilitator. The main reason I’m developing this blog and these sorts of “Aha!” moments around CFG work is that I’m working hard to catch up with the educators I coach. I have never been a classroom teacher, I do not have an education degree, and when it comes to analyzing data, particularly, I have never taken a statistics class, either. My blog (and future excerpts in *Connections*) is my practice ground for reinforcing and further developing my understanding of the foundations of CFG work. In contrast with certain members of federal and state departments of education who also have no teaching credentials, I have no intention of attempting to tell any teacher how to do their work. But CFG work can be effective for anyone in any occupation, and the art of facilitation, of helping a group find its own wisdom, is quite separate from education credentials. I hope you’ll agree, but if you have any thoughts about the matter, I welcome your emails to luci@nsrfharmony.org 