How to enforce your CFG community Agreements

“enforce: (verb)  1. To compel observance of or compliance with (a law, rule, or obligation).  2. To cause (something) to happen by necessity or force.”

“Enforcing” doesn’t seem like something a welcoming Critical Friends Group® community would want to encourage, does it? The fact is, every group manages meeting behaviors either indirectly by following unspoken norms, or directly by consciously developing and collaboratively setting Agreements, for example, by using our Setting Agreements Activity. Regardless of the means of creating them, your group will need to enforce those Agreements or norms in some way. Otherwise, your participants’ frustrations will rise and their trust will decrease with every infraction.

Particularly if you’ve taken CFG Coaches’ Training, you have likely heard all the arguments for having a list of Agreements (ground rules, norms, etc.). Some of these are detailed in a previous article I wrote for Connections entitled “Agree Now or Pay Later.” Agreements can be empowering and help create an atmosphere of safety and trust. But if they’re set but not followed, they can perpetuate a dysfunctional meeting atmosphere.

CFG community Agreements must not be made in isolation. They must be created amid a series of intentionally scaffolded activities to build trust. Keep in mind that part of trust-building is making sure that a majority of the group doesn’t simply outvote or over-ride the voices of the minority. Trust is necessary for someone with a different viewpoint, opinion, or mindset to be comfortable enough to be able to express this to their group of colleagues. Setting Agreements requires that the

Michele Mattoon is the Director of the NSRF, an International Facilitator, and CFG Coach. Prior to leading NSRF, she taught first and second grade at Harmony School for more than 20 years and is an award-winning educator. Email her at michele@nsrfharmony.org.
Part of trust-building is making sure that a majority of the group doesn’t simply outnumber and override the voices of the minority.

Even if a majority wants to believe it, “declaring” any particular agreement will not magically transform a group into a healthy, collaborative learning community. Transformation and trust takes time and effort on the part of every member of that group. That brave participant’s statement made it very clear that we needed to do a lot more work toward building trust with one another before we could even attempt to agree on a set of behaviors for how we were all going to work with one another.

That serious example aside, let’s say that your group is at the stage where setting agreements makes sense. Let’s go on to say that your group has completed the Setting Agreements Activity, and has a nice list of seven agreements that are designed to encourage the members to do their best work.

After defining the terms and honing the language of each agreement, all members of the group should give a signal (usually a “thumbs up”) that they are each individually willing to do their best to abide by the list. Now comes the hard part: How do you make sure that people are committed to following the Agreements? Who is responsible for making sure the Agreements are honored? What happens if someone in the group breaks one?

First of all, there are many things you, as the coach of a group, can do to make sure that the Agreements are always in the minds of the members each time they meet. Here are some recommendations:

1. Always make your Agreements visible to the group. Many groups post their Agreements prominently in the room where they are meeting. Others include the Agreements at the top of printed agendas distributed at each meeting. Some groups use technology to project an image of the Agreements throughout each meeting.

2. Review the Agreements to make sure the group remembers them. For the first two or three times you meet after setting Agreements, start each meeting by reading them aloud. You may ask one volunteer to read through all of them, or ask someone to start by reading the first one and go around the circle with other participants reading the rest. I once participated in a CFG community where the members were challenged to pop corn out the Agreements from memory. We knew we had eight agreements. Could we remember them all?

3. Revisit your Agreements periodically to make sure they still work for your group. After those first few meetings, gauge whether the group can remember and maintain them all. Then, you may have the group read the list aloud only once every three or four meetings. But now you should ask the participants whether the list still works for them, or whether they feel like one item is no longer needed or something else needs to be added. The point is, the Agreements should be a living document that grows and changes over time. Telling the participants of the group you’ll be periodically revisiting the list allows participants to, in a de-personalized way, address the fact that a particular Agreement is being broken, or that some need to be changed or added. Remember, as the coach, you are part of the group, and as such, you can also request a modification of the Agreements list.

Who is responsible for making sure the Agreements are honored?

Now comes the hard question, “Who is responsible for making sure that the Agreements are honored?” Generally, when I ask this question while conducting a training, one or more participants respond, “The facilitator.” Then, I will point out that we spent the better part of a day talking about the importance of a CFG community being equitable—all voices in a CFG group are heard and honored. I’ll point to the Agreement Examples page on page 14 of their Coaches’ Handbook, and note that many examples reference each participant’s responsibility to the group, including “Participate,” “Support each other’s learning,” and “Share responsibility for the group.” If all CFG members have equal voice, then does it make sense for only the facilitator to be responsible to make sure the Agreements are honored?

After I ask that question in the training, participants often look around and shift uncomfortably in their seats. Eventually, someone will say, “Well, it’s probably the group’s responsibility, then.” Then, I’ll ask another uncomfortable question, “OK. So, what do we do if someone breaks an Agreement?”

It’s hard to confront a person who’s breaking a rule if you feel that you have no authority in the situation. (Hence the reason the facilitator often gets tagged as “the protocol police.”) In a CFG community, we are essentially saying that we all have the authority and the responsibility to uphold the Agreements we’ve created as a group. That being said, how exactly do you do that without the “offender” feeling attacked, called-out, or humiliated? Well, hopefully, you’ve had this frank talk with your CFG community on the day when you created your Agreements, and can agree on a plan of action that everyone will feel comfortable with. Here are some solutions that others have come up with:

1. Issue “Gentle Reminders.” One of the “Agreement Examples” in the Coaches’ Handbook is “Gentle Reminders,” and many groups who anticipate trouble make a point to include it. The idea is simply to gently remind any person breaking an Agreement that they are, in fact, breaking it. When faced with a reminder that’s gently given with no hint of judgment, people often react by saying something like “Oops! Sorry!” and immediately stop.

2. Agree on a physical, silent signal. Groups agree on a silent signal to use if they notice an Agreement being broken. Examples of signals:
   - Finger on closed lips

Not everyone will feel comfortable issuing “Gentle Reminders,” especially if the group hasn’t established a strong sense of trust. This might lead to only a couple of people in the group issuing those gentle reminders, which can reinforce a sense of non-equality.

Advertisement

CFG work = collaboration magic!

Now, multiple colleagues participating in one open training for new CFG Coaches will get a discount! One person attending CFG Coaches’ Training in Bloomington, Indiana, $815. Two or more, only $765 each (see pg 14 for details).
Tugging an earlobe
Making a ‘T’ with your hands (like “Time out”)
Making an ‘X’ with your arms
Covering your eye or eyes

Downside—The “offender” must see the person sending the signal to receive it. That won’t happen if that person is breaking an Agreement like “Practice being present” by checking their email or intensely engaging in a side conversation with their seatmate. To remedy this, you can add a gentle reminder, as well as the signal.

3. Use a prop as a silent signal. Some groups use red cards to signal that an Agreement has been broken. (One is given to each member of the group at the beginning of the meeting, and upon a need, the card is held up like a “stop sign” used by a school crossing guard.) When the offender is no longer breaking the Agreement, the red card is put back on the table. Other groups use flags or handkerchiefs in the same way. I’ve heard of groups who mark the offender to do their best work when working in their CFG community.

Downside—Props can be distracting and disruptive (particularly if you are using the red foam ball method). Once a meeting has been disrupted, it can be difficult to bring everyone back to the correct mindset.

4. Appoint a rotating “Process Person.” To avoid the facilitator from having to always point out Agreement violations, some groups assign one person in the group to provide “gentle reminders” as well as make notes about how the group is working together in general. This person will rotate every meeting, so all group members take on the process person responsibility at some time during the school year. Sometimes the process person will immediately respond to Agreement breaches by issuing gentle reminders. At other times, they will list out what Agreements were broken and how many times, and report back to the group at the end of a protocol or activity.

Downside—Not everyone is comfortable being a process person, and as a result, may not bring attention to any broken Agreements. If this happens, it could cause frustration in the group with the agreement breakers and the process person, as well.

Clearly, establishing trust among the members of your CFG community is the best way you can ensure that your group’s selected Agreements will be honored. Without trust, members might feel resentful, attacked, and/or defensive when reminded that they have broken an Agreement. Keeping your Agreement List as “a living document” is rotated every meeting, so all group members take on the process person role, as well.

We selected the Critical Friends Model as a strategy for developing the collaborative capacities outlined in our professional learning design for school and district leaders. In 2015-2016, district-wide professional learning was restructured to design common areas of focus and “systemlessness” (a term from Michael Fullan’s The Principal) across schools while still allowing schools the autonomy to customize professional learning. The district professional learning design included aligned learning targets for teachers, instructional coaches and school and district leaders. Learning targets were intentionally designed as “we can” statements instead of “I can” statements, emphasizing the important role collaboration plays in continuous improvement. (See Fig. 1) Leadership is a lonely proposition. We cannot do our jobs alone. We must surround ourselves with good people and build positive relationships with them. David Brooks, author of The Road to Character, reminds us “that people are much stronger than they think they are when in pursuit of their goals.” Critical Friends Groups combat the loneliness of leadership, allowing for purposeful work in a trusting learning community.

We are excited about our CFG work as it represents the basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving schools and increasing student achievement. These efforts are leading to increasing leadership capacity of our principals, teachers and instructional coaches. So what is the hook? You may be thinking this is surely an oxymoron. How can one be a critic and a friend? Let us explain.

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, “A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.”

Similarly, Critical Friends Groups are typically groups of 8-12 colleagues who “are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (or protocols).” CFGs meet for at least two hours monthly and have unguarded conversation as they think about critical incidents of practice, examine student work, identify school culture issues, and challenge each other’s thinking. A trained CFG Coach facilitates the group’s work. The facilitator uses protocols to provide constructive feedback designed to push deep thinking. Trust is the ultimate human currency in a CFG.

In Lexington One, principals, assistant principals, and members of the Instructional Services Team have participated in Critical Friends Coach Professional Learning Communities.

Administrators, what’s on your mind?

For help with these issues and more, attend the Critical Friends Group® Administrative Training

October 9-11 2017 • Bloomington, IN • $600 • More info on our website

Dr. Gloria Talley serves as the Chief Academic Officer of Instructional Services for Lexington School District One. She is the current President of the SCASS Instructional Leaders Roundtable, Mary Gaskins is the Director of Professional Learning in Lexington School District One, and a CFG Coach. Before serving in this role, she was a middle school special education teacher, literacy coach, and curriculum specialist. Email her at mgaskins@lexington.net