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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.

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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 override 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

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group doesn't "vote" for each agreement, but rather that each Agreement is adopted through consensus after deep listening and discussion. For this reason, Agreements will always differ from group to group based on factors such as who is in the group, where the group is meeting, and what the group wants to accomplish.

Once, when I was facilitating a CFG training at a school with deep-rooted issues around trust, I worked with a group that struggled mightily with Setting Agreements. Although this happened many years ago, one interaction stands out in my memory quite clearly. One person in that group suggested including "Assume good intentions" on the list of Agreements. Another participant disagreed, saying, "I can't agree to that because I can't assume some of the people in this group have good intentions. In fact, it's been my experience at this school that some people harbor the worst intentions toward me." And, there it is. The group was actually well-served by that comment. Although the trust the speaker revealed was unsettling, if they hadn't been brave enough to reveal "the elephant in the room," the group may have gone on for some time unable to collaborate effectively because of the group's lack of trust in one another.

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?

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How do you make sure everyone is committed to following the Agreements?

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 popcorn 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 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?"

What happens if someone breaks one?

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 in 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. Gentle reminders should be given in a light, maybe even humorous, way.

Downside—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.

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*

- *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 choose to put a bowl of lightweight red foam balls in a bowl in the middle of the table. When someone breaks the rules, that person is pelted by the others in the group.

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 post is rotated 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" will also go a long way to making sure that your Agreements will help nurture an environment that allows each member to do their best work when working in their CFG community.

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

Friendly critics and Critical Friends in South Carolina

Previously published in the November 2016 issue of Palmetto Administrator magazine
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Take the Lead was the theme of the 2016 (South Carolina Association of School Administrators) SCASA i3 Conference in June in Myrtle Beach. President George Ward challenged the membership to be a role model; to mentor someone; to enhance our leadership and to be a change agent. Leaders in Lexington School District One take these challenges seriously and have spent the past year engaging in leadership through the lens of a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Model to enhance our leadership skills.

We selected the Critical Friends Model as a strategy for developing the leadership 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 "systemness" (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 includes 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)

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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 telos, their purpose for living. As Nietzsche put it, 'He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how'." 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 the heck is a Critical Friend? 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

Figure 1

Teachers	Instructional Coaches	School and District Leaders

As a TEAM, we collaboratively:
• Design clear **learning targets** to establish expectations for student understanding and enable students to monitor their progress and assess the quality of their work.
• **Assess students continually** to measure progress towards the learning targets.
• **Analyze data and adapt instruction** to address students' needs.
• Design **collaborative** opportunities for students to actively **engage** in learning.
	• We implement the seven core practices of student-centered coaching:
	  ◦ Setting goals for student learning (standards-based, engagement, and/or behavior goals)
	  ◦ Using standards-based learning targets
	  ◦ Using student evidence to co-plan instruction
	  ◦ Organizing coaching through cycles
	  ◦ Co-teaching with a focus on effective instructional practices
	  ◦ Measuring the impact of coaching on student and teacher learning
	  ◦ Partnering with the school leader
	• We use strategies to engage in reflective dialogue with teachers.
	• We develop strategies and tools for building the capacity of teams.
	• We develop strategies for creating a collaborative school culture.
		Develop capacity as a lead learner, system player and change agent.
		
		As LEAD LEARNERS, we:
		• Initiate and develop teams to build collective capacity in pedagogy.
		• Provide teams of teachers with descriptive feedback and coaching.
		• Analyze and use data to monitor student and teacher growth relative to established student growth targets.
		• Plan and facilitate effective professional learning.
		• Create a learning culture for new pedagogies (deep learning tasks, collaborative learning partnerships, and use of digital tools and resources).