

Tips for Setting Up a Successful CFG

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Over the past year, I have been compiling a list of tips for new coaches who are interested in putting together a successful Critical Friends Group. Generally, during a five-day new coaches training, much of the fifth day is used toward planning. Over and over on this planning day, I get asked questions such as these:

“How do I start a CFG in my school?”

“Do we ask people to volunteer to join CFGs or should we make attendance mandatory?”

“How should I introduce protocols to my school?”

“What protocols should I introduce first?”

“What can I do about ‘push-back’ from teachers who think that CFGs will be just “another thing on their plates?”

Here are some suggestions (in no order of importance) that can set the stage to having a successful CFG experience for all involved:

1. Start with a small group that you feel will be successful. A group of people who want to give it a try are much more likely to succeed than a group that is forced to be there. Once that group is excited by the process, create opportunities for them to share their excitement with others, (for example, during staff meetings or retreats).
2. Reference schools that have been successful when it comes to setting up CFGs. There are many schools that have incorporated CFGs and protocols into their culture. Sharing the web-sites of these schools with your colleagues can show them the value of collaborative learning communities.
3. When you introduce CFGs, talk openly about the rewards, but also acknowledge the difficulty of learning protocols, active listening, giving and receiving feedback and reflecting.
4. Get allies—partners. The “strong” people in the school (the people with strong voices and perceived power) might be the very people you need to get on your side. Asking them to help you introduce a protocol to the school is a good way to do this. If you can convert one of these people, they will be strong advocates for the work in the future.
5. Make sure to get a read of the group’s needs by survey or “pre-conference.” This way people feel that their needs are being heard and will be addressed. Design your CFG agendas around the results of these surveys. It is a wonderful way to encourage “buy-in”.
6. It is very important to set agreements and talk about expectations for participation during the

first or second CFG meeting. Without agreements, the group doesn't know what to expect or how to work together in an atmosphere of safety and trust.

7. Make sure to share with your group what your "job" is as a facilitator before you begin a protocol. That way when you have to refocus a conversation or remind someone to follow the protocol, participants won't perceive the instruction as rude.

8. Front load, front load, front load! Be transparent about what you are doing and why it is vital so that participants know what to expect. This encourages trust in the process. Be sure not to skip important "scaffolding" activities (for example, make sure to go over Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger and how to give and receive feedback before doing a Tuning Protocol).

9. Remind participants that CFGs are a process that educators use their entire career to improve their practice, not something that "will be done" sometime in the near future.

10. Practice responsive facilitation. Your job as a facilitator is to meet the needs of your CFG, not to push your own agenda.

11. Pass on facilitation responsibilities when your group members are ready. Although you are the coach, sharing facilitation enforces the notion of a democratic, collaborative community—all voices in a CFG are heard and honored!

12. Introduce protocols in other meetings (staff meetings, for example) to show your staff how effective and efficient protocols are for getting work done. Once they experience the benefits of protocols, they will be more likely to want to join a CFG.

13. Serve food and drinks—make it special. This is especially important if you meet after a long school day.

14. Be professional. If you are organized and prepared as a coach, people will be more likely to trust in your leadership. Having a notebook for each person in your CFG with the protocols you will be using for that day, posting the agreements and coming to meetings having already had a pre-conference with the presenter makes a CFG meeting go smoothly and will lead to success.

15. Set times to meet ahead for the year. Avoid trying to find a different time each month to meet.

16. Use a timer—a bell is more impersonal and feels less rude when interrupting speech.

17. Have a CFG of coaches for support!

I am always interested in adding to my list of tips for new CFG coaches. If you have any tips that aren't mentioned here, please email them to me at Michele@nsrfharmony.org and I'd be pleased to make room for them.