National
School
Reform
Faculty

Peeling the Onion
Developing a Problem Protocol

Developed in the field by educators affiliated with NSRF.

Purpose
To provide a structured way to develop an appreciation for the complexity of a problem in order to avoid the inclination to start out by "solving" the problem, before it has been fully defined.

Procedure
As with all protocols, it is important to identify a facilitator who is responsible for keeping the group to the allotted time. This allows the group to maintain focus, keep on track, and frees the group to do its best thinking. The facilitator reviews the process with the group and then it begins. The times for each step can be adjusted to fit the available amount of time and the number of people in the group.

Facilitation Tips
Most of us are eager to solve problems before we truly understand their depth. This protocol is designed to help us peel away the layers in order to address the deeper issues that lie underneath the surface. If the problem were easy to solve, it would not still be a concern to the group. The facilitator should keep to the times strictly and gently remind people when they are giving advice too early.

The Protocol
1. The keepers of the problem describe the problem/dilemma and ask a question to help focus the group's responses. (5 minutes)

2. Clarifying questions from group members to the presenters (these must be purely informational). (3 minutes)

3. A round where everyone says: "What I heard [the presenters say] is …"
   (The presenters are silent and take notes.)

4. A round where everyone says: "One assumption that seems to be part of the problem/dilemma is…"
   OR, "One thing I assume to be true about this problem is … " (The presenters are silent and take notes.)

5. Another round where everyone says: "A question this raises for me is…"
   (The presenters are silent and take notes).

6. [Perhaps] another round where everyone says: "Further questions this raises for me are…"
   (The presenters are silent and take notes.)

7. Another round where everyone asks: "What if…?" Or, "Have we thought about…?" Or, "I wonder…?"
   (The presenters are silent and take notes.)

8. Presenters review their notes and say, "Having heard these comments and questions, now I think…" (The group members are silent and take notes.)

9. *Now what?* Together, the presenter and consultants talk about the possibilities and options that have surfaced.

10. Debrief the process. How was this like peeling an onion? What about the process was useful? Frustrating?