NSRF
National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center

Connections

March 2016

In this issue

Two new variations on the Tuning Protocol
4

Opportunities to become a CFG coach
6

CFG work and Growth Mindset
8

Teaching questions and impact on democracy
10

NEW! Administrator's open training
14

And more!

If you're reading on an electronic device, watch for icons O M C and blue type indicating hotlinks to more content or email addresses.

Change is hard. But CFG communities and NSRF protocols can make it easier.

"It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement, there is life, and in change there is power."
~ Alan Cohen, life coach and author

Awhile back I ran into a friend of mine (let's call her Jennifer), at the gym. I could immediately see her exasperation and asked her what was wrong. "I'm so sick of this whole peer observation process at our school. It is just a colossal waste of time! The idea in the beginning was that the teachers could learn from each other. Instead, what winds up happening is that it's just a big hassle that's more trouble than it's worth."

"Observation can be a great learning tool if it's done right," I said. "Why is it such a problem at your school?"

"Well, first of all every time we have to meet, we struggle to find a time that will work for both of us. It's such a pain that we all put it off until the last minute. We really don't prepare for the visit and the whole process feels rushed. If we ever do manage to meet each other to talk about the experience afterwards, all that gets said is, 'Nice job' or 'That was fun!'—nothing remotely useful."

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.

Email her at michele@nsrfharmony.org.

Jennifer agreed that she would love to actually learn from her colleagues. When I asked her what would have to change for real learning on both sides of the observation experience to happen, she paused for just a minute, but quickly came up with these points:

- The person who was being observed would have to be okay with not showcasing their best lesson when the observer was present. To be a real experience, the observer would have to see an actual example of what routinely happens in their classroom.
- The person who was observing would actually have to give honest feedback about what they observed, but without seeming like they were judging or "grading" the observed teacher's performance.
- The person who was observed would need to avoid taking the feedback personally and really be open to thinking about what they could do to improve.
- Ideally, each person would learn something from the experience that would actually result in better teaching practices for the both of them.

Jennifer sighed and continued, "But all those things will never happen. We're too used to doing it the way we've always done it. A lot of us complain about it, but even if the majority of us wanted to do it differently, I'm not sure how we could make a change."

Analyzing difficulties around change

We all know how difficult it is to make real changes in our personal or

work lives. Change seems to require an incredible amount of willpower and determination. Inevitably the person trying to make the change reverts back to the old, unwanted behavior more than once during the process. Research on changing habits shows that anywhere from 81-92% of people who make New Year's resolutions fail to achieve their sought-after changes—one quarter of resolution-making people actually fail in the first week! So why is making changes so darn difficult?

One main reason is that people are creatures of habit. Our brains are constructed in such a way that every time we do something, we reinforce that habit (that way we deal with conflict, whether we are on time or late, what and how we eat, etc.). This means the more you do something, the more likely you are to continue to do it in the future—hence the phrase "become set in our ways." If we're not careful, we become prisoners of our habitual behavior and decide that this way of being is "just who we are" or "it's just how we do things here." As educators, we resist students making these declarations about themselves, but why do we think it's different for adults? Research shows that adult brains can change, that they can learn and grow throughout our lives. Change is made easier when structures are put into place that support the wanted change, while excluding the unwanted behaviors.

Another reason change is hard is that we are often forced or expected to change by circumstances (or bosses) beyond our control. Autonomy is always more comfortable than powerlessness. When significant changes are demanded to begin immediately (such as new initiatives being rolled out ASAP or changes in state law that affect how you teach a particular subject), we are unable to easily predict what will happen. Beyond the discomfort of actually making the demanded change, this inability to prepare for the future leaves us uneasy and can trigger our survival instincts. Unpredictability = Risk = Stress. Because our known situation is replaced by an unknown one, we can become fearful and not know how to move back into our comfort zone. For positive change to occur in these situations, we need a concrete plan to deal effectively with risk, one that will actively nurture a sense of safety and comfort.

Helpful things to remember

When trying to make changes or doing your best when forced into them, it's wise to keep two important ideas in mind:

1. Change is not an event, it is a process. We all know that concept of change is simple, but not easy. Need to lose weight? Change your eating habits. Need to be better at getting to work on time? Leave for work 15 minutes earlier every day. Right. These seemingly simple solutions require not only that the person sees the benefit of making a change, but that they break a number of bad habits to cultivate the change. (For example, losing weight may mean extra food shopping time, learning how to cook healthy food, beginning to keep a food log, and maybe incorporating exercise into daily routines.) One change can naturally lead to another, with no end in sight. Instead of thinking "I'll have this down in a couple of weeks," it may be better to think about change as something that is a part of life, and that even if you successfully change one collection of habits, you'll be changing something else in the future. Change itself is inevitable and ongoing.

2. Change does not happen in a linear fashion. It is completely unrealistic to think that once you decide to make a change, you won't ever fall back into the habitual way you did it in the past. Remember the statistics from the failure rate of New Year's resolutions? One quarter of people who make their resolutions decided in the first WEEK that they were a failure and stopped trying. How many times could they have possibly tried and failed in that period of time? Once? Twice? Research has shown that people who make real changes don't quit after failure. They pick themselves up, learn from it, and then try again. And again. And they do better as they go.

What did Jennifer do?

So, let's go back to Jennifer's problem with the classroom observation time. Luckily for her, she is a part of a Critical Friends Group community that meets once a month. How could she use her CFG group to help make real change in this area?

1. First, pinpoint exactly what needs to be changed. Clearly, Jennifer already put quite a bit of thought into this. She was able to list the many aspects of the experience that weren't working, from trying to schedule observation times, to being unclear how to give and receive feedback that could improve teaching practices for both teachers. Unfortunately, at this stage, she doesn't have a clue how to make the situation better or even if it can be made better.

I pointed out that this sounds like a dilemma, and doesn't she belong to a CFG community? No longer feeling helpless, she decided to present this problem to her group, knowing that together, they might be able to come up with some ideas to make the situation better. A couple of months after our initial conversation, she called me with an update.

2. Getting help from her (critical) friends. Jennifer met with her CFG coach to preconference and determine which protocol fit this particular situation. The coach and Jennifer eventually decided that the Dilemma Analysis Protocol might be the way to go. At the next CFG meeting, Jennifer presented her dilemma of being unsatisfied with the current process for peer observations, the group analyzed the problem, and through the protocol, gave her many possible suggestions. Some of them were:

- Everyone involved in the peer observation process could go over the Giving and Receiving Feedback sheet and/or the Feedback Nightmares activity.
- Any two people planning a peer

observation could pick one of the NSRF observation protocols to structure their observation time and to ensure that deep conversations about teaching practice occur.

- Observation and the post-conference time could be scheduled all at once at the beginning of the year, rather than trying to find time each month.
- She could work on a proposal and take it to the director of professional development.

3. Making an action plan. Jennifer told me she decided to present a proposal to the director of professional development that included clear action steps for the change process. She included these suggestions in the proposal:

- Observations will be scheduled when all other meetings are scheduled before the beginning of the school year.
- Teachers will become trained during an in-service day on how to give and receive feedback and on the observation protocols they could use for the process.
- Teachers who observe one another plan on meeting after the observations during their prep time (or at another designated time of their choice), not more than a week after the observation.
- To promote trust and honesty, people who observe one another would be in the same CFG community. Once the experience is over, they would then report back to their CFG group about how helpful it was.
- At the end of the school year, a simple survey would be sent out to see if the new system is working. If there are areas that can be improved, the CFG groups will follow up with suggested changes in those areas.

At the time of our second conversation, Jennifer was waiting to hear back about her proposal, but the conversation reminded me of another step that would be helpful to her school over the long-term.

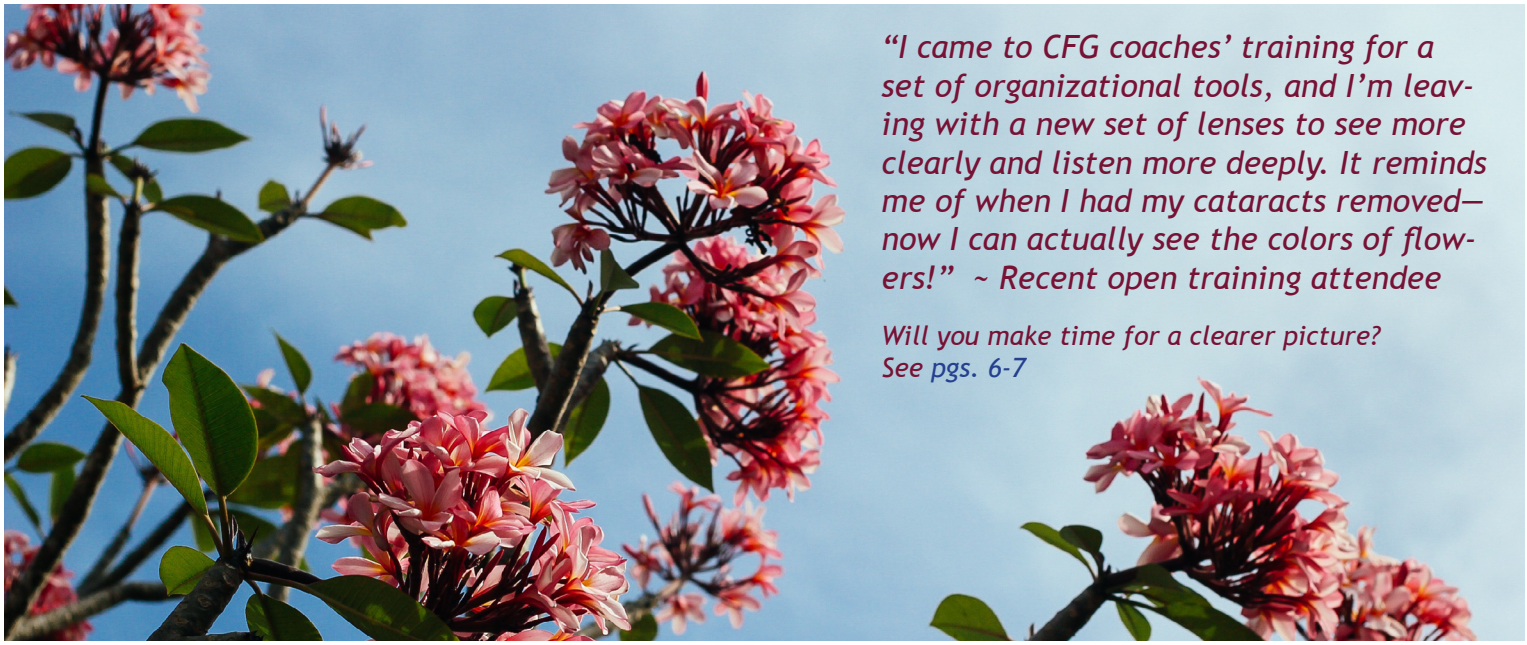
4. Evaluate and support the new process over the course of the next few years. CFG communities along with the professional development director could make sure needed changes are made to help the process move more smoothly the next school year and giving the participants time to celebrate successes (perhaps by using the Success Analysis Protocol or the Celebration Share Activity), either in their CFG communities or with a larger group like a staff meeting. It also might include refresher trainings or learning new observation protocols in the upcoming years.

Using your own CFG communities to support change

To recap, CFG communities nurture successful changes by making sure that:

- Change begins with people who see the need and are self-motivated to put in the effort it takes to make the change, (like Jennifer and her CFG group).
- Through the use of protocols, change is described in concrete positives like, "Here's what we think will occur as a result of this change" and "If this change occurs, what do you hope to get out of it?"
- Specific, manageable goals are created answering all the "who, why, what, where and how" questions, which is often the last step of NSRF protocols.
- Once goals are attained, CFG groups can celebrate them to show progress.
- Problems that occur in the change process are always addressed promptly, effectively, and without blame.
- People who want change can interact with others who positively view the change process.

I'm looking forward to hearing the outcome of Jennifer's proposal she made with the support of her critical friends, and I was glad for the opportunity to write about change with this specific example. If you have a story about your CFG helping you make an important change, we'd love to hear from you.



"I came to CFG coaches' training for a set of organizational tools, and I'm leaving with a new set of lenses to see more clearly and listen more deeply. It reminds me of when I had my cataracts removed—now I can actually see the colors of flowers!" ~ Recent open training attendee

Will you make time for a clearer picture?
See pgs. 6-7

Photo courtesy: Snapwire, Arvee + Marie