

HAVE PROTOCOL. WILL TRAVEL. Reflections on my National Facilitator Internship Year

By Eugenia Woods Tanner, NSRF National Facilitator,
NSRF CFG Coach in Tennessee, gtanner@email.usn.org

My first encounter with Critical Friends' Groups was as a member of a School Renewal Committee for the University School of Nashville SACS accreditation process. Based on my interest in issues surrounding diversity at our school, I was assigned to a committee charged with conducting a beta test of using CFG Protocols to encourage more open conversation about race. The need for a vehicle to support these types of conversations emerged during interviews conducted by our Diversity Task Force. Our Director of Multi-Cultural Affairs learned of the CFG Protocols through her work in diversity and was subsequently certified as a Coach in order to lead our committee for this beta test.

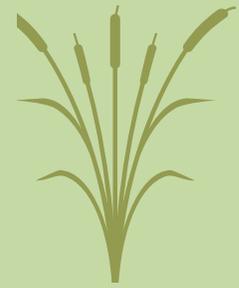
We began meeting in the fall, and a few months into the academic year, our Director of Multi-Cultural Affairs accepted another job offer, leaving us without a trained Coach to lead our experience. Given the "risky" nature of our conversations, no one in the group was willing to take over leadership of our committee without training. I checked the NSRF website and discovered that the first 3 days of an open training were being offered prior to our next committee meeting. Venus aligned with Mars, the expense was approved, I registered for training, and a year ago this month began my odyssey of Coach's training and leading a CFG. Following Coach's training, the facilitator and I discussed the possibility of continuing my work with the NSRF by training to become a National Facilitator. She agreed to be my Mentor, and I started the journey as an intern for a five-day open training last summer. It

has been a game-changing year of reflection and personal growth.

Through my experiences with CFG training and my work at University School of Nashville, I have come to understand that educating educators is not for "weenies." The expectations for quality are always high, and an inability to clearly articulate the training results in a loss of credibility for the Trainer. This knowledge raised the stakes and the pressure as I prepared in advance of the internship and particularly on the night before each session.

My first days as an intern were spent observing my Mentor as she began preparing a diverse group of remarkable and experienced educators to become Certified CFG Coaches. Initially, my primary goals were to pay careful attention to how she transitioned from one Protocol/Activity to the next, as well as the information that she frontloaded prior to each protocol. From the comments of the participants, it was clear that her explanations helped them connect to what they were there to learn, and I realized that her ability to clearly articulate these transitions was the key to the successful delivery of the Coach's Training.

As I observed my Mentor's seamless and well-honed delivery through the lens of a trainer (as opposed to a trainee), I was struck by the importance of reflection to the learning process. It became clear to me that the learning was cemented through group and individual reflection, not by the protocols and activities alone. Giving the participants adequate time for reflection following each protocol served not only to



Eugenia Tanner, M.Ed., SPHR, is the Human Resources Manager at University School of Nashville (USN), a K-12 independent school located adjacent to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition to her work at USN, she is the Human Resources Consultant for Knowledge Academies, a start-up Public Charter opening in June. A self-described "professional development geek," Genie is always on the lookout for opportunities to grow professionally, and she thinks adding the NSRF National Facilitator certification to her resumé is a particularly satisfying accomplishment.

Contact Genie at gtanner@email.usn.org

deepen the learning, but also to strengthen the bond within the group. Without time to reflect and debrief, we would miss the opportunity for synthesis, not only of the material but also the group's process.

Another important aspect of the debrief is the art of "question-asking." As Coach trainees we were taught to value the importance of a well-crafted probing question, which serves to push the thinking of the "presenter" forward. So it is for the Facilitator during the debrief following a protocol. It is the Facilitator's responsibility to craft questions that push the thinking of the group as a whole, as well as the individual group participants. It is not only the participants in a Coach Training who need to work on their question asking skills, but the interns working to become National Facilitators that need to master the skill of crafting open-ended questions.

Between the transition and debrief resides the protocol, the cornerstone of CFG meetings. The use of protocols, or structured conversations, distinguishes CFGs from other professional learning communities. The first protocol I was assigned to facilitate was the Success Analysis. Though I didn't make the connection until later, in our planning discussion for this internship I verbalized my concern that as an intern it was particularly important that the first protocol I facilitated be done so successfully in order to set a positive tone and gain the trust of the group. It proved a successful place to start. As my confidence increased, my Mentor turned over more of the facilitation responsibility. We progressed through the training using protocols and activities to lay the foundation the participants needed to facilitate their own CFGs.

Effectively facilitating the variety of protocols and activities available to us is more difficult than it initially appears. As I struggled through my initial attempts at facilitating, I perceived a bit of attitude about my inexperience among a few participants. This attitude quickly reversed once practice time arrived and participants took turns facilitating. Suddenly they were turning to me for guidance, and I must admit it was a reassuring to know that even the most seasoned educators had doubts about their ability to carry it off well. It seems that we all hold ourselves to pretty high standards. Bottom line, the only way to increase your comfort level with group facilitation is through experience. Like any discipline, it takes patience and practice to learn, but it is so worth it. The reward is

in knowing that everyone participated, no one voice dominated, and all perspectives at the table were honored. It can be very therapeutic!

I love the low tech and interactive nature of the CFG Coaches Trainings. We could fancy it up with technology bells and whistles, but my concern is that while we tried to focus on the bullet points we would be distracted from experiencing the content. In order to create truly collaborative teams, we must have respectful and productive conversations with one another. It would be challenging to create that experience if we were looking at a screen instead of into each other's eyes.

A successful Coach Training depends on the Facilitator's commitment to mastering transitions, honing question-asking skills, and being able to effectively facilitate protocols and activities. To that end, this internship was an invaluable part of my process. I learned as much, if not more, from observing facilitation that did not go well and reflecting on why. Observing what should not be, crystallized what should be.

Speaking in public is a challenge that I have faced head on through this internship. I am appreciative of the patience of the participants who allowed me to hone my skills during their training. I am grateful to have had such a supportive Mentor during the past year and look forward to further collaboration down the road. I head out with a suitcase filled with the right assortment of tools to successfully deliver training.

Have protocol. Will travel.



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