

Leading protocols with fidelity

Perspectives from NSRF National Facilitator Terry Daugherty and some of the new CFG Coaches he's recently trained. You may contact him at terry.daugherty.nsrfgmail.com

Updated protocols available to members, and the *Critical Friends Group® Coaches' Handbook* used in CFG Coaches' Trainings are big steps up from the original protocols and the *Resource Book* previously used in trainings. In the new Handbook, each protocol, activity, and text appears in a logical order, divided into sections by its use. The coach's guide in the back of the book offers tools around protocol usage, and around creating and sustaining a CFG community. The fact that every protocol is broken down into fine, granular steps gives coaches clearer directions on administering the protocol, increasing the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Recently, I led some trainings that included classroom coaches (peer support specialists), and the power of these changes became manifest. These classroom coaches have impressive resumés of training and have acquired useful skills. Most had already been using some type of protocols in their work with classroom teachers, so their inclusion in this training proved ... interesting for all of us.

Early in new coaches' training, we introduce the *Microblabs Protocol* , a simple and disciplined way to discuss topics with equity of voice and active listening. Afterwards, we debrief, asking participants to first write what they want to remember about the use of this protocol, then proceeding with a shared debrief. Particularly with this first protocol learned in a training, we model the debrief carefully in order to set the expectations and reveal the importance of debriefing. Because this training cohort expressed a familiarity with protocols, I was pleased that they did not seem impatient—in fact, they seemed to debrief deeply.

The training progressed, and some more participants noted that they had already used these protocols, but they were willing to “go with the flow” and not insist on agenda changes. As always in training, each protocol was shared with attention to detail, transparent discussion around facilitation, and a debrief session. When participants began to practice facilitating protocols on their own, I noticed that their facilitation included clear instructions and were rich with powerful debriefs.

Reflections from the group revealed their shifting opinion about use of protocols. They were saying “By doing the protocols with fidelity, I have a clearer view that I did not have before.” Several had used the term “fidelity,” meaning that they were now careful to follow every step, not skipping over or speeding through some parts that weren't previously valued by them. They also recognized the debrief as a defining moment for advancing thinking around what a given protocol was trying to accomplish.

Talking further with these participants, they said that they previously weren't always clear what protocols were supposed to accomplish. In fact, their experience reminded me of the childhood game Telephone. Staff learned to use a protocol from someone who learned it from someone else, who learned it from someone else, who may or may not have been certified to teach protocols. Slowly, the usefulness and fidelity of any given protocol diminished and the reason to use protocols got lost in the whirl of educational noise.

With our CFG coaches' training, these classroom coaches now felt they both had clear expectations of what the protocols were supposed to accomplish and the knowledge of when to use them. This gave them a new excitement about using these tools in their work. Their daily Reflections indicated this change: *“I now see the power of using a Tuning Protocol in my work with teachers. I want to use this as soon as possible with some of my teachers, to help them work on improving some of the lessons they struggle using.”*

We are reminded that we can learn something new about a protocol every time we use it or watch someone else facilitate it. Many facilitators offer instructions like these when participants have experience with protocols:

“Trust the process. Be true to the protocol and to the presenter's focusing question. Since the personality, background, and skills of every NSRF National Facilitator vary, the way everyone delivers and facilitates the protocols necessarily varies somewhat. All current NSRF National Facilitators know how to lead the protocols properly, so learn from this opportunity to watch a certified pro lead these protocols the way they were meant to be led, and see what you learn from our transparency around facilitation.”

The process of creating a trusting group, developing and holding agreements that allow tough work to be done, the selection of the right protocol to use and then doing so with fidelity are all powerful learning experiences for everyone. Participants discover that CFG work—not just individual protocols—can be a powerful tool for change when applied to people intent upon improving work in the classroom.

It's also a good idea to refresh one's coaches' training if one learned about protocols long ago. NSRF continues to evolve and “tune” our work: new steps or language that improve a protocol's success will continue to be added to existing and new protocols and activities, and then added to our trainings, be they for new or experienced coaches, or administrators. There will always be new learnings and new insights about familiar tools—tools that ultimately will improve staff's success and thus help students improve their learning.