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This is a short-but-sweet issue. If you've considered writing about your use of NSRF protocols, your experience within (or leading) a Critical Friends Group, or any associated topic around this work, please let us know! If we publish your article, we'll reward you with a free year's membership to our website!

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

Our dilemmas around "dilemmas"

1. A situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, especially equally undesirable ones.

2. A difficult situation or problem.

— Google definitions of "dilemma"

Throughout their careers, everyone runs into professional challenges without clear answers, issues that resist all our best attempts to solve them. NSRF defines professional dilemmas as puzzles, problems that are seemingly without any desirable outcomes. Dilemmas can arise in almost any relationship or situation. Dilemmas can be big (often the "elephants in the room" that no one openly addresses) or small (individual problems that apply to only one person in a very particular situation).

During our Five-Day CFG Coaches' Training, we spend almost an entire day learning about dilemmas and modeling dilemma protocols. In preparation for the training week, we ask everyone to bring to training a professional dilemma with which they currently struggle. The two most common responses to this request are:

"I have so many dilemmas, I don't know which one to choose!" and

"I don't really have any dilemmas at this point in time."

No dilemmas? Really?

How is this possible? I

do not believe those people are saying that they have perfect lives where everything goes exactly the way it should and/or that they know all the answers to every problem that arises. Rather, I suspect there is a problem around their definition of "dilemma" being significantly different than ours.

What dilemmas are not.

People who have trouble bringing a professional dilemma to training tend to think that their struggles are too small, too insignificant, to warrant the time of the group. People who are hesitant about bringing a dilemma may also believe that, although they do have challenges, or issues that never seem to get resolved (things that come up over and over again), they have managed to live with them this long and they could probably continue to do so in the future. "Buck up," they may say to themselves, "Life is hard. Get over it!"

With all that in mind, it may be helpful to point out that **dilemmas can arise in almost any relationship or situation**: helping a student overcome significant challenges in a subject area, rolling out a new initiative in the best

way possible, starting a new leadership position in a place known for interdepartmental infighting, and many others.

Nobody will care. Nobody can help.

We've heard people assume that their prob-



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Everybody faces dilemmas. Some examples: a student completely missing a crucial concept, parents unable to deliver their children to weekend tutoring sessions, starting a new job in a school known for in-fighting, managing the start of a new initiative successfully.

lems would not be interesting to the others, or that the others in training come from entirely different situations and thus couldn't relate.

The fact of the matter is that the more diverse the group to which you bring your dilemma, the broader the perspective and responses you will receive. Plus, if I can think about YOUR problem for an hour, and maybe become your personal hero by solving it for you, I don't have to worry about my own problems for awhile. And sometimes I'll have the bonus of discovering that your way out of YOUR problem may provide me some clues for addressing a dilemma of my own!

Working on dilemmas within CFG meetings make individuals, groups, and entire schools stronger.

Schools that allow the creation and support of safe and trustworthy Critical Friends Group communities, where staff can admit to their toughest dilemmas, are the schools with the healthiest cultures and the greatest possibilities for continued adult and student learning. It's those places where it's NOT safe to address problems that we worry about. When a trusted group regularly tries to solve its participants' dilemmas by sharing, analyzing, and seeking solutions collaboratively, everyone wins.

Dilemmas that affect more than one person are often discussed in small groups in the parking lot or lounge, but not necessarily in arenas where the problem can be solved. Some dilemmas are obvious to everyone in a school, while others are more individual and can trigger feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy.

Transforming a bad habit into a positive one.

Dilemma protocols transform the habit of complaining and venting about things you don't like or that don't work well into a habit of only discussing problems if you have some power to fix or at least influence them. If you CAN effect change, let's try to solve the dilemma. And if you





don't have any power in the situation, there's no point in talking about it. CFG members encourage each other to accept things that can't be changed, thereby letting go of the stress associated with them.

Getting by with a little help...

When we grapple with tough problems, it is easy to assume that the problems are undeniably and irrefutably "no-win" situations. Luckily, with that feeling often comes a little piece of hope—I might be able to solve this problem (or at least make a positive move forward) if only I knew how. NSRF dilemma protocols are useful because your critical friends may be the very people you need to find new vantage points or seeds of ideas to help you solve your puzzle.

Regularly scheduled CFG meetings foster a healthy atmosphere of continuous improvement by productively dealing with "the elephants in the room" that don't generally get addressed in any meaningful way. You may not know it, but bringing your dilemma to the group may also help someone else solve their own dilemma.


"Don't try this at home!"

Dilemma protocols are powerful, because when they are used correctly, they enable people to "discuss the undiscussables." We want to be clear: You MUST create significant trust and safety before attempting to use NSRF dilemma protocols. Really, dilemma protocols should only be used within a CFG community that has completed several foundational and trust-building activities such as [Probing Questions Practice Activity](#) , [Feedback Nightmares Activity](#) , [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#) ) and [Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger](#) 

Be careful, unless a group has built significant trust together and effectively learned how to give and receive feedback, dilemma protocols can actually create more problems than they solve. That said, when a CFG community has done the scaffolding to do this gratifying work, members can bring major challenges

and receive both support and new ideas toward positive resolutions.

Prepping for success.

Given the importance of discussing dilemmas during CFG meeting time, we recommend that anyone who can't readily identify a dilemma review the [Dilemma Preparation Worksheet](#) . This worksheet provides a definition of dilemmas and some steps to help you more clearly articulate your dilemma and create a focusing question for your dilemma protocol. These steps include:

- 1. Decide whether the problem you want to bring to the group is a dilemma.** A dilemma is a dilemma if:
 - You are constantly thinking about it,
 - It is not already on its way to being solved,
 - You have some power to solve it, and
 - It is important enough that you will spend the time and energy required to work on it.

- 2. Spend some time reflecting and writing about your dilemma.** Writing about your dilemma will help you articulate all the layers of complexity around it, including emotions you have about it. Some questions to think about:

- Why is this a dilemma for you? Why is the issue important to you?
- What have you done already to try to solve the dilemma?
- What have been the results of those attempts?
- What context do your colleagues need to know surrounding your dilemma? (The correct answer: surprisingly little.)

- 3. Frame a focusing question that will guide your colleagues to the specific area(s) you want to address.** Focusing questions often start with "How can I..." or "How can we..."

Once this preliminary work is

done, you will be ready to take your dilemma to a preconference with your CFG coach who will choose the proper dilemma protocol for your needs.

Final tips:

Remember that dilemmas are closely tied to emotional responses. If it didn't matter to you, it wouldn't be a dilemma for you. Because you do care about the situation, your emotions may come out in a stronger way than you are expecting. There may be times during a dilemma protocol when tears of frustration, anger or relief show up. That's OK. Remember, you are in a safe place, sur-

rounded by your beloved critical friends. Because the group has created safety and because it's being led by a certified CFG coach, you can get the help you need to find some relief with your dilemma.

Dilemma protocols do NOT promise a complete solution, but occasionally one appears, and even when the protocol delivers something "smaller" like a powerful change in perspective or a variety of potential next steps, the relief you feel will be significant. Don't be afraid of dilemma protocols!



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CREATE
SIGNIFICANT
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SAFETY BEFORE
ATTEMPTING
TO USE NSRF
DILEMMA
PROTOCOLS.

Sometimes you need a different perspective.



*What if I threw open the door
instead of peeking through the window?*