

A bookmark from the
National School Reform Faculty:

*The key
to helpful
feedback isn't
expertise, it's
thoughtfulness
around the
question.*

*(quote from
a participant in a recent
CFG coaches' training)*

Using NSRF protocols when leading a committee to complete a high-stakes, quick-deadline project

Terry Daugherty uses Setting Agreements, data protocols, Affinity Mapping, Tuning, and other CFG tools to help a committee with a tough job

Have you ever participated in a committee that met repeatedly but accomplished very little? What a contrast with CFG meetings, right?

If you're a CFG coach, I have some pleasant news for you if you haven't already thought of it: your protocol matching skills can be truly mission-saving when you're tasked with leading a committee. Let me tell you about my experience a few years back, when the large school corporation I worked for asked me to lead a committee that would build three years of calendars for the district.

The committee consisted of thirty people — central office administrators, building principals, teachers, parents, students, and community members, some unofficially representing the local university. As you might guess, everyone had a position to defend and came to the meetings with their own agendas to promote. In addition, the superintendent defined parameters she expected the calendars to incorporate — and told us that she expected us to be finished creating the calendar in just sixty days!

Given that deadline and the variety of strangers who needed to work together effectively and quickly, I immediately started thinking about the tools I knew would help in team-building, trust-building, and effective collaboration.

Prepping for the first meeting

My CFG work informed me that a diverse group is most helpful in solving complex problems, and that groups of like-minded people can sometimes reinforce their own opinions rather than incorporate or collaborate with differing perspectives to find a solution. So, in preparing for our first meeting, I

assigned seats, sorting everyone by role and geographic location. At each meeting, each table included one administrator, one teacher, one parent, etc., also making sure no table had too many people from a single school.

By setting up our first meeting so that every table brought together people with different points of view rather than the same background, participants didn't have a choice but to hear others' perspectives. If I'd let like-minded friends and colleagues sit together, each table would have been "preaching to the choir" and thus wouldn't have made any progress. This seating arrangement literally put them in a position to immediately begin hearing and, I hoped, considering the others' perspectives as well as their biases.

I also appointed one person at each table to facilitate (mostly keeping track of time and being prepared to take notes and/or share out with the larger group), and announced that at each meeting, the facilitation role would rotate.

First meeting: Agreements

Once the committee members were seated and the superintendent introduced them to their objectives, I introduced them to the idea of [Setting Agreements](#)  and suggested we start with three basic group norms:

- *Treat all with respect*
- *Speak only for yourself (unless you clearly tell us differently)*
- *Keep an open mind*

The committee ended up adding three more:

- *What is said in the room stays in the room*
- *Assume positive intent*

- *What is best for ALL students come first*

The last agreement turned out to be most important of all, as I will explain later.

Second meeting: Data

Before our second meeting, everyone spent time reading research on school calendars. At the meeting, we studied the calendars of ten surrounding school districts using a [Data Analysis Protocol](#) . This protocol gave the group a single structure to make sense from a lot of school calendar information. Following the protocol, participants asked themselves:

- *What do you see?*
- *What do you not see?*
- *What implications does this have for our work?*

Third meeting: Affinity Mapping

Next, members exposed their perspective on the largest areas of concern by doing an [Affinity Mapping Protocol](#) . After areas of concerns were identified and listed, the committee members moved into the hard work of prioritizing group concerns.

At last began the work of using all of our research and the results of our protocols to begin actually creating different calendars to meet student needs. This work brought out many heated discussions, as many participants still held onto parts of their original personal agendas. Seeing that the group wasn't progressing,

I redirected everyone to our Group Agreements to see if the members still valued them. By taking "extra" time to backtrack and ask the committee to check in, they were able to confirm their commitments again. This "digression" helped the discussions move forward more efficiently and effectively. Once again, my experience as a CFG Coach saved the day.

That imperative last agreement

The agreement to "keep students first" filtered many of the discussions. Rather than being over-influenced by any other constituency, this commitment helped everyone work toward calendars that worked for students primarily. Of course there were still disagreements about exactly what constituted "students first," and decisions to be made. I used these moments to give all committee members a chance to speak their thoughts. Following my CFG coaching experience, even when we were not working within a protocol, I tracked individuals' participation and made sure to invite the quiet members of the committee to speak. As had often been the case within my CFG meetings, this was where new points of thought came out.

Fourth meeting: Tuning

Once the committee committed several dates to the calendar, I introduced a [Tuning Protocol](#) 

to fine-tune the calendars, identifying what aspects the committee members thought were important and attempting to fix the problems that needed correcting. Again, I was thankful for my coaching experience, which made the prospect of so many potential problems being revealed become manageable and productive instead.

When coaching a Critical Friend Group, you practice matching protocols with problems that the group encounters. The same occurred with this process.

In the end, the final calendar may not have included what every committee member felt they personally needed, but everyone felt satisfied with the calendar, feeling it would be best for all students.

Three years after this committee completed its mission, committee members still speak to each other, a not-small accomplishment in itself! Further, I've noticed that many of these people are serving on committees together again, including me. I'm happy with how my CFG coaching skills and protocol selection skills served me during that committee, and that makes me confident to participate in committees now and in the future. Of course, if I could LEAD all the committees in order to ENSURE they used protocols.... Wait, did I type that out loud?



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for instructional technology. He became certified as a NSRF National Facilitator in 2007, because he recognized that Critical Friends Group work was the most significant practice toward improving student learning he had ever experienced. He is currently a STEM consultant for Center Grove Community School Corporation. He may be reached at tdaugh2001@gmail.com.

Keep
students first