A Grand Slam

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I began my training as a CFG Coach as the only person of color in the group. This is not unusual for many of us who have been trained, those of us who are currently working in school reform and facilitate CFG Coaches Seminars.

When NSRF decided to place equity in its mission statement, it was a turning point for those of us who felt that the organization didn't do enough to address the issues that face many educators, students and facilitators of color.

As we continued to do the work of creating and deepening the work of CFGs, opportunities were presented to take it beyond suburbia into urban communities (the "inner" city) where there is more diversity. Many provocative questions ensued: Would these processes work with groups where there are many people of African, Hispanic, and Asian descent? How would they receive it? What facilitators have the knowledge and skills to work in urban settings? And more importantly does race/ethnicity or class matter? While diversity among ethnic groups differs as much as learning styles, much of the latter is addressed far more frequently than the former. Why is this the case? And what does this have to do with education reform and the work of CFGs anyway?

How could we both build on the foundation of CFGs and address the realities of inner city educators, their students and families?

The question that looms large in the minds of some NSRF Facilitators is how to bring about the results that have been seen in suburban and rural environments to urban communities? Which features are similar? Which are different? How does a facilitator know these answers and create dynamic environments that will enable us to realize the mission of the National School Reform Faculty which is *"to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone?"*

When I started working with The Black Alliance for Educational Options in September 2003, I soon learned that I could create the opportunity to gain some insights into these questions and perhaps even some answers. In my position as Program Director for the Small Schools Project, I had groups of Black educators to work with to increase the supply of quality educational options for Black children. Without a doubt, these individuals care deeply for the souls of Black children. I had the freedom to construct CFG Institutes that would meet their needs and assist them in the work of planning to open new small high schools in urban communities. My NSRF colleague, Camilla Greene, and I designed and facilitated these trainings. (Gina Kaplan co-facilitated with us in Milwaukee, WI.) Camilla and I asked ourselves all of the questions other facilitators ask about goals, objectives, audience, resources, logistics, etc., but what was significant was that we also asked how we could design training for groups who were comprised predominantly of people of color who work in urban settings. What would be different from other groups that we'd trained? Doubtless, we both knew that it would indeed be different from what we had done in other places. How could we both build on the foundation of CFGs and address the realities of inner city educators, their students and families?

We planned and conducted these trainings and, needless to say, they were quite a departure from others that I was aware of. We included readings authored by people of color who wrote about successful experiences with students who were racially, ethnically and economically diverse. We used resources from Lisa Delpit and also from Asa Hilliard's chapter in *Young, Gifted and Black,* "No Mystery: Closing the Achievement Gap Between Africans and Excellence" We also began the "equity" dialogue on day one as opposed to the usual point of entry on the afternoon of days two or three. On one hand, the groups were surprised to see two African-Americans facilitating and leading work in education reform. On the other hand, participants commented on how surprised they were that issues which were important to them as adults and those that impact the lives of students of color were intentionally addressed in depth throughout the training. From the onset to the conclusion of our five day seminars, we remained focused on how the work of CFGs could bring about change and lasting improvements in the lives of the educators, parents, families and children we were serving We were elated with the reception we received, the daily reflections and evaluations. As we continued to observe and think about why our trainings were so successful, I came away with three critical factors that I believe enabled our accomplishments and will ensure the success of other CFG Seminars where there is a significant mix of African-Americans (or more broadly those of African descent), Asians and Hispanics. I will use the baseball metaphor of "The Grand Slam" to illustrate my thoughts. Your "bases" need to

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be loaded as follows: On 1st base is the content of CFG work; 2nd base is knowing how to collaborate; and 3rd base is having cultural competency with critical consciousness.

Content: knowing the work (origins, objectives, tools, structures,) of Critical Friends Groups

Collaboration: showing genuine respect for the thoughts, views, and needs of the group; being willing to work together to reach the intended goals; and acting in ways that demonstrate commitment to these tenets. Knowing the rules and making them explicit from the beginning as well as having open, honest dialogue is crucial. Paying close attention to power dynamics and endeavoring to seek consensus. All of this requires give-and-take on the part of participants as well as facilitators.

Consciousness: herein lies the critical element that will break or make the experience meaningful. By consciousness, I mean having awareness of the history, culture and location of minority and/or disenfranchised groups here in the US and prior to their arrival. Possessing an understanding (or at the very least, the desire to understand) of what it will take to move an historically oppressed group of people forward in their knowledge, to develop fortitude and empower them to act in ways that will foster greater levels of academic achievement. Knowing this will inform the facilitators' attitudes, preparations (content about CFGs and what bodies of literature and experiences will speak to the group) and what is needed in order to build genuine relationships with individuals and the group as a collective. This consciousness requires facilitators to do their own ongoing homework, to be thoughtful and fearless, yet cautious, in their quest to get at the hard issues and intentionally create the space to have the difficult conversations that most facilitators oftentimes avoid. By not focusing on critical consciousness, the facilitators' behaviors will likely yield cursory conversations; shallow inroads (if any) and will unlikely bring transformative moments that can change the beliefs, processes and actions that are required to dismantle systems of inequity.

Lastly, but no less important than having bases loaded in the aforementioned areas, is to build authentic relationships with whomever is in the room. Establishing heartfelt relationships will set in motion everything that follows from being transparent about facilitation, making difficult decisions in consultation with participants, working through dilemmas, taking risks and genuinely caring and trusting one another.

How does one establish authentic relationships with those whose backgrounds differ from one's own? How do these relationships impact CFG trainings and our ongoing personal and professional development? How can our work "close the achievement/preparation gap?"

We are tired of the sessions that dance around issues which are of fundamental importance to students, families and other adults who are intellectually, emotionally and spiritually dying in urban communities because of those who want to remain safe in their comfort zones. We decided to do something different. We broke the mold. These sessions were not for the faint of heart; however, no one was sacrificed. Our agenda was clearly predetermined, but we had alternative activities and resources available in the event we needed to change our course. We were hyper-vigilant in staying attuned to the group and therefore practiced responsive facilitation. We checked in frequently with "others" and each other to be sure that no one was "left behind." As a matter of fact, those who many of you might think would be uncomfortable with this sort of dialogue weren't, or at least didn't admit it. What they did admit is that they were enlightened by the conversations and never had opportunities to hear such candid and insightful dialogue that prompted them to reflect on their own values, assumptions and practices in the classroom both with those whom they were entrusted to teach and work with.

I reflected on my experiences and the question of how can NSRF Facilitators (white and non-white) develop meaningful pathways to bring together the work of CFGs with all adults committed to equitable education for all children and students from diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds? How does one establish authentic relationships with those whose backgrounds differ from one's own? How do these relationships impact CFG trainings and our ongoing personal and professional development? How can our work "close the achievement/preparation gap?" After doing my own homework and talking with other educators of color, I learned that there's really no mystery when working with groups comprised primarily of people of color. The following formula can maximize your chances of winning: prepare your team to win by doing your own homework so that you know your content; work toward true collaboration; be or become culturally competent with critical consciousness; and build effective, authentic relationships. Having your bases loaded with these essentials in place can result in The Grand Slam and yield a powerful learning experience for everyone. ■

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