of practice among these educators, they promoted a mechanism called the critical friends group. The name was drawn from English school reform circles, and was described in a brief 1993 article by Art Costa and Bena Kallick. “A critical friend,” Costa and Kallick wrote, “is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend.” Critical friends are well-positioned, Costa and Kallick continued, to understand the context and goals of the work they are critiquing and to advocate for its success. They may be students in the same course who commit to reflecting on each other’s learning progress. They may be school administrators who overcome the predictable loneliness of their roles by networking across settings. Or, Costa and Kallick suggested introducing the application NSRF would adopt: critical friends may be teachers who form “a critical friends group, ... of as many as six people who meet and share practices, perhaps every other week.” Such critical friends press each other to go deeper.

Nancy Mohr and Alan Dietcher, 2002

But how does such a group gain influence as well as depth? How does something as intimate as a critical friends group — or CFG, the term that soon gained currency — become influential beyond its six participants? How does this kind of critical friends group build trust among group members? How does it become a mechanism called the critical friends group. The authors propose two site-based professional learning communities: action research and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). They combine these ideas by using protocols to guide their work. They call their learning teams inquiry-oriented PLCs and define these as “a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular basis to learn from practice through structured dialogue and engage in continuous cycles through a process of action research articulating a wondering, collecting data to gain insights into the wondering, analyzing data, making improvements in practice based on what was learned and sharing learning with others.” (Dana and Vendol-Hoppey, p. 10.4) As I read the description, I thought it sounded suspiciously like a CFG! And as I proceeded through the text, I continued to have difficulty differentiating between the inquiry-oriented PLC and a Critical Friends Group.

The authors present 10 essential elements of healthy PLCs:

1. Establish a vision that creates a momentum for their work. (p. 33)
2. Build trust among group members. (p. 27)
3. Pay attention to the ways power can influence group dynamics. (p. 30)
4. Understand and embrace collaboration. (p. 33)
5. Encourage and appreciate diversity within the group. (p. 36)
6. Promote the development of critical friends. (p. 37)
7. Hold the group accountable for learning and its documentation. (p. 39)
8. Understand change and the discomfit it may bring to some PLC members. (p. 43)
9. Have a comprehensive view of what constitutes data, and be willing to consider all forms and types of data throughout the PLC work. (p. 45)
10. Work with building administrators. (p. 47)

This test serves as a reminder of the powerful sustainability and “best practice” nature of our work. While at first glance it might seem as if the authors are renaming that work, their continual reference to NSRF and the authors of the protocols leave the reader wanting to know more about the National School Reform Faculty and its work. For the veterans among us, this test provides a quick reference and some good scenarios to share and compare. Finally, this test would also serve as a good book study for new or novice CFG coaches. Reading its stories and seeing examples of embedded protocol in practice will spark reflective conversations.

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