

Focused listening: Placing understanding first

By David Nelson and Luci Englert Mckean, NSRF National Facilitators equitymap@gmail.com luci@nsrfharmony.org



When coaching a CFG session we make sure that when participants enter the room they're welcomed by the sounds of relaxing music, the smell of fresh coffee, and the temptations of (mostly healthy!) snacks. We as facilitators know that the atmosphere sets a

tone for the work that's to be done; we also know that the thoughtful preparation behind our group's most successful work reaches far beyond grocery lists. The preparation for the CFG meeting really begins only when we have a confident understanding of why we are there and proceeds successfully only after the careful selection of processes to meet those needs. Often the effectiveness of the CFG meetings themselves depends upon the work that is done outside the group, most notably in the pre-conferences, which are perhaps the most crucial part of the CFG process.

When discussing pre-conferencing within CFG Coaches' Trainings, NSRF facilitators stress that an effective pre-conference results in you, the coach, becoming an advocate for the presenter. It is vital that you understand as authentically as possible their perspective and needs.

It is in this context that we've sought to create more tools to help make CFG pre-conferences even more successful. One such tool can be found in the newly released

*An effective pre-conference
results in you, the coach,
becoming an advocate for the presenter,
understanding as authentically as possible
their perspective and needs*

version of the Collaborative Cue Cards, featuring the revamped quadrant of "Focused Listening," which outlines its characteristics and stems for use in CFG work. Created by a team of NSRF National Facilitators, the Focused Listening strategies help us as coaches to intentionally hone our listening and ultimately improve our understanding.

Advocating, not just coaching

As we encourage people to bring less-than-perfect work and dilemmas to the meeting, we must first have built significant trust within the group, and with us as their coach. Coaches must develop techniques and strategies to understand the presenter's needs, not merely at a surface level, but at a deeper level of empathy. By fully empathizing with the presenter's issues, we can more accurately select the best protocol to address those needs. Then, in the meeting, we guide the group to provide the best possible help—focused in scope yet broad in options. Remember, when we run a protocol, we are not only ensuring the participants follow the protocol with fidelity, we are actively championing the presenter. We must ensure that their needs are met and the protocol results in content that helps in the specific, desired way revealed in the pre-conference.

Deep, focused, generative listening

Although this quadrant of the Collaborative Cue Cards will be helpful to anyone doing CFG work, the terminology of Focused Listening was carefully crafted in the context of pre-conferencing. We looked at a wide variety of resources to help convey this skill effectively.

In his widely acclaimed book outlining *Theory U*, Otto Scharmer suggests that, to move to a higher future possibility, we must pay more attention to our "field structures of attention" and seek to "shift the inner place from which we operate." To clarify the differences, he points out that listening occurs at four levels and he contends that by becoming more conscious of how we listen, we increase the likelihood that we can access the "intelligence of the heart," a level that Scharmer calls "generative listening" or connecting to the higher future possibility.

When we as coaches pre-conference, we must move beyond, what Scharmer refers to as the "downloading" listening stage, when people listen to confirm what they already know, and the "factual" listening stage, when people listen for what is different from what they know. Instead, through careful practice of Focused Listening, we can learn to listen "empathically" to "begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else's eyes" (Scharmer, Intro).

An article from [Mindful magazine](#) reminded us that the listener's internal impulses can too easily interfere with focused listening, and so we caution you to listen from a

Slowing down and placing understanding at the forefront creates much more satisfying results in any conversation, but especially those in which we have responsibility for leadership: coaching, teaching, parenting, and more

non-judgmental, accepting stance. Avoid any inclination to dispute, dismiss, or try to fix the problem within the pre-conference. Remember, within the pre-conference, you don't want to jump ahead to possible results of a protocol, you only want to understand the problem and the presenter's desired outcomes deeply enough so that the best protocol match can be made, the one most likely to give the presenter what they need so they can move forward.

Cycling through listening focuses

Our steps of focused listening and the variety of suggested stems we offer widen the potential for understanding and empathy. We propose listening for clues in five categories, not necessarily in a specific order. Our Focused Listening stems illustrate that understanding occurs at levels of depth, ranging from surface understanding of the information, facts or needs to deeper understanding of the values, emotions or assumptions behind those needs.

Information/Facts: Paraphrase or mirror the language of what the presenter has been seeing or experiencing.

Needs: Discern the presenter's intended requests or needs out of the protocol.

Values: Understand the underlying values that the presenter holds in the context of this problem or piece of work. What are they revealing, in the pre-conference, that is especially important to them?

Emotions: Identifying and empathizing with the presenter's emotions as they outline the piece of work or dilemma will help you both know that you, as coach, "get it."

Assumptions: Check in with the presenter when you hear or infer beliefs and assumptions that they may be holding around the problem/work or around a specific direction or subset of advice they're hoping to receive.

The process of applying Focused Listening calls on us as coaches to first listen, then paraphrase or mirror the content, and then, after receiving confirmation that we've "heard" correctly, ask follow-up questions that widen our understanding of the situation, moving beyond specific needs to the context behind those needs.

Expanded uses of these skills

Like many other skills and strategies of CFG work,

Focused Listening has broad applications beyond a coach's pre-conference sessions. Focused Listening skills help anyone listen better, with fewer internal distractions that inhibit true collaboration. These skills help us be more effective educators, colleagues, and participants in any sort of meetings. Not surprisingly, participants often comment about how useful the strategies are in personal relationships, work interactions, and especially in situations that begin as misunderstandings.

Over and over again, while consciously practicing Focused Listening, we've found that slowing down and placing understanding at the forefront creates much more satisfying results in any conversation, but especially those in which we have responsibility for leadership: coaching, teaching, parenting, and more. To be the best partner,

"To be the best partner, colleague or coach, when I remember to place understanding above sharing my own experiences or stances, I move closer to empathy and even to a better future self." – Dave Nelson

colleague or coach, when I remember to place understanding above sharing my own experiences or stances, I move closer to empathy and even to a better future self.

Collaborative Cue Cards in a variety of packaging options are available in the NSRF online store. They will be included in upcoming CFG Coaches' Trainings as part of the training materials kept by the hosting organization. If you have ideas or resources about teaching these skills, we'd love to hear them.



Dave Nelson is an NSRF International Facilitator based in Athens, Greece, facilitating trainings in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Dave teaches high school Social Studies at the American Community Schools of Athens, where he is also Faculty Development and Growth Program Coordinator. He may be reached at equitymap@gmail.com



Luci Englert McKean is the Assistant Director of the NSRF, Managing Editor of Connections, an NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach. Prior to joining NSRF, she curated three TEDxBloomington conferences and had a full career in marketing and copywriting. Email her at luci@nsrfharmony.org