

An activity for the new academic year and other new beginnings

The What's on Your Plate? Activity

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Have you ever met someone who felt they* had exactly the right workload, with time to fulfill beautifully all their responsibilities and keep a balanced life outside of work as well?

Me, neither. (But if you do know someone, please introduce me! I'm sure I could learn a lot from them.)

Most people feel they have a "full plate" if not "too much on their plate," and are more or less stressed about it all. Universally, people experience meetings as a waste of time. What's a new CFG coach to do, convincing colleagues to commit to attending a new monthly meeting? How do we quickly communicate that CFG meetings are emphatically not "just another meeting?"

Author and educator Parker Palmer encourages everyone to develop a "circle of trust" for themselves. He says "People who feel at risk of losing touch with their souls will say that they need such a circle. Yet they often claim that their fragmented and frenzied lives—the lives that put them at risk—make it impossible for them to join! The very situation that creates our need for safe space seems to prevent us from getting what we need."

At NSRF, we speak of CFG work as NOT "one more thing on your plate," but the "fork, spoon, and knife" to help you resolve everything that's already required of you. Some have even gone so far as to describe CFG meetings as "fancy tablecloth affairs" in which people are on their best behavior.

Last fall the CFG community I coach added several new people. I developed an activity to illustrate and demonstrate our philosophy. By introducing "What's on Your Plate?" as an

opening activity, we transitioned from our busy day into being present in the meeting. I explained that I greatly valued their time and attention, taking time to join to this meeting, and that I knew they all had a lot on their mind. This activity was designed to honor all those issues and tasks that they'd been thinking about.

I brought out paper plates, markers, and a plate I had already completed as an example. Distributing blank plates and markers, I asked them to begin by writing notes or drawing small pictures to illustrate what was on their minds, the unfinished tasks and problems they had tabled in order to join this meeting. I said, "This is a good place to jot down those problems that wake you up at night, or that you can't help yourself from thinking about when you're not busy at work." And then I showed them my example, crowded with content, with some "portions" demanding more attention than others.

Everyone got started, some with great enthusiasm. After four minutes, I asked if anyone needed more time, and we proceeded. Next I suggested that they silently review their own plates and acknowledge all that was on their minds. Then I asked them to pass their plates to me, and I would hold them for safekeeping, and we'd review them later, together.

Then we proceeded with our first meeting of the year. As we got to the end of our agenda, and everyone was silently writing their Reflections for the meeting, I brought the plates back out and arranged them so everyone could gather around. Now I said, "I look forward to reading your Reflections and I hope you got enough value out of this meeting

to want to return to the next one. As we proceed through the year, you will experience how the trust we build together, and the protocols and activities we use throughout our meetings will actually help you with all of these things. With your permission, I'll hold onto these plates, keep them safe and private in my files, and bring them out again later in the year."

At our last CFG meeting of the year, I'll bring them back for review. We'll see what tasks and problems we've already addressed directly and what has been improved indirectly as a result of our collaboration, and the new thoughts that have arisen. I expect we may have a few "seeds" for our early meetings for next year.

As I've submitted this article for editing, I learned that Christina Birbil and the CFG Coaches' team at the American Community Schools of Athens came up with a similar activity last year as they launched their accreditation review process. Using paper plates, everyone identified their attention to individual professional goals, professional passions, life passions, and their time on the Action Research key to accreditation. They asked "Who's in the room and what are they serving up?" NSRF National Facilitator Penny Kynigou pointed out that "Everyone was feeling like this meeting was just one too many and we wanted to show them that CFG meetings could be not only the knife and fork, but also the excellent dining companions to make it all digestible and even fun!"

We'll post this activity on our website this summer. Stay tuned! 

***In support of gender equity and gender neutrality, NSRF uses "they" as a singular pronoun for individuals of unknown gender.**