

What are the best combinations for CFG teams and in CFG trainings?

## “Shuffling the Deck” in CFG terms

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Imagine your school staff represented by a stack of playing cards. There are a variety of metaphors you might choose here, but for instance, let's have the number cards represent grade levels, the suits (hearts, spades, clubs, diamonds) represent subject matter, and the face cards (king, queen, jack) represent administrators. You might even identify a “joker” or two. Depending on the context of the “game,” you might even find a few “wild cards” among your colleagues.

Every card game begins with the dealer shuffling the cards thoroughly, then dealing each player a “hand” of random cards. In poker or any other card game, there are specific hands that you're trying to achieve in order to win the game.

I was thinking about common ways that schools set up working groups of colleagues, and some “poker hands” work better than others in particular instances ... but the most “winning hands” for CFG work may surprise you. (I'll start by addressing the composition of CFG communities, but also describe specifics regarding ideal composition of on-site CFG trainings. Open Trainings are always a “shuffled deck,” beneficial to all who participate.)

### Straight flushes in cards and meetings

One powerful poker hand is a “straight flush”—any five-card sequence in the same suit (e.g.: 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 of diamonds). When you open a brand-new deck of cards, this is the order the cards appear: Ace to King of one suit, then another, a third suit, and the fourth, til you have 52 cards, with a couple of jokers thrown in at the end. Most schools build committees in this orderly way. Consider the suit representing subject matter and the

number, various classrooms: several middle school math teachers of relatively equal power working together on shared curricula, for example.

Since most of us are familiar with this sort of working group, I have a question for you. How many times have you sat in a committee meeting and, when a problem is introduced, you have a pretty good idea of who will speak first, who may not speak at all, and approximately what every speaker will say before they say it?

NSRF protocols, of course, are designed to structure conversations to achieve a desired outcome. Within a protocol led by a trained coach, there is no room for idle conversation, ranting about something beyond our control, or content that isn't focused on the problem at hand. So converting committee meetings into Critical Friends Group meetings can help participants be more effective by using protocols to encourage equality of voice, reflection, critical thinking, and creative solutions.

### But for coaches' trainings...

However, if you're planning a new CFG Coaches' Training, then “not shuffling” is less-than-ideal, if not downright problematic.

Putting together a training group consisting of 15 literacy coaches from your district, or only central operations staff, for instance, means that you're limiting the world-view of the whole group. Remember, in coaches' training, all participants bring in their own dilemmas and pieces of work, and we run protocols to help them address those things within the trainings. A too-similar cohort might benefit from using protocols, but may not think in drastically different ways. And they're probably already in meetings together

all the time. In contrast, coming to a CFG coaches' training, especially an “open” training with educators of all sorts, is the perfect opportunity to get vastly different perspectives on one's problems that pushes each one's thinking beyond the silo of their usual interactions.

For the sake of discussion, let's stay temporarily with our imaginary cohort of 15 literacy coaches from the same district. In that training, when someone presents a chunk of student work, everyone's thinking primarily about their shared experience as literacy coaches, and maybe their own experience coaching this familiar student. But imagine for a moment the perspective that that student's math teacher or baseball coach might add to that group -- wild card, right? Not all wild cards are helpful, but others have the potential to generate a plethora of brand-new ideas.

When you're forming a training cohort, you don't want to have just one wild card in a sea of “same suit” others.

You want all the participants to have some attributes and perspectives unique to them but also some attributes and perspectives shared with at least a few other people in the room--a shuffled deck that's not all one suit.

### Especially important when there are power imbalances

Picture what happens when you have a group of relatively equal colleagues and one “boss” (or colleague who isn't a boss but has close ties to that office). Even with the best of bosses, there will be some dilemmas that people will not feel comfortable addressing when the boss is in the room. Additionally, conversations will be skewed. Even groups that have

used our Setting Agreements activity will struggle with this sort of imbalance, and frankly, it's not a good environment for the boss to get support, either.

Similarly, having a group with just one person of color can be quite difficult for that person. The group may consciously (or unconsciously) expect them to represent "the voice of all Teachers of Color" or worse, "the voice of all People of Color." Clearly, this expectation isn't remotely fair to that teacher and likely will cause more friction than it removes. That said, groups of ONLY Teachers of Color can be enormously helpful, allowing a safe container where they may support each other without concern for observers who are not part of the group.

### When "shuffling" is best

What we've learned in 20+ years of Critical Friends Group work is that talking to people who are NOT your "just like you" gives you the broadest context to reconsider your problem or next steps. Teachers who work with a very different age group, for example, have a perspective about tactics that work brilliantly with younger students. You may have never heard of those ideas and thus could not have considered the way they might positively impact the situation. Educators from an entirely different environment (teachers from rural public schools learning alongside teachers from elite private schools, for example) bring fresh skill sets and considerations to a discussion.

Obviously in your school-based CFG work, you're not going to bring in teachers from other schools. However, when you're first beginning to consider CFG work, you may want to consider sending a few of your team to an "open" training with NSRF. Attendees at open trainings are "shuffled" randomly—because individuals can attend from any organization, open trainings tend to have VERY diverse types of people in the room. They're

also a perfect option when a school or district would like to train their administrators separately from their faculty training happening on-site. Schools and districts often find that this creates "the best of both worlds"—colleagues working together in a training at a less expensive price-point, and a few admins attending a training elsewhere, where they'll have the joy and satisfaction of being "not the boss" but a peer among peers.

### The specific time when you want a "royal flush"

In poker, the very best hand that wins every time is called a "royal flush." This is the Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and ten, all of one suit (Clubs for example). Because these are the most powerful cards in a deck, the royal flush represents school or district administrators.

Not long ago I led a training which included heads of school, operations-level managers and directors, (specialty) coaches, and classroom teachers: a grouping that we specifically do not recommend for on-site trainings because of the power imbalance. As we were discussing dilemmas that could be brought to the training group for our practice session, one of the heads, looking at some of the teachers from his school, said, "You have NO IDEA the dilemmas I know about but can't discuss with you!" His frustration was palpable and appropriate.

NSRF always suggests that, whenever possible, administrators be trained in a separate cohort (their own "royal flush") rather than mixing them in with teachers for this reason, and because the opposite is also true: people would rather their bosses not know about problems until after they have tried to solve the problem themselves.

Similarly, administrators should not expect to attend CFG communities alongside their staff but instead should have their own administrative CFG community. In an admin group, they

are surrounded by people of relatively equal-to-them power, with the same sorts of dilemmas and relatively similar work to bring to the group for improvement. It's vitally important (one might say "critical") that administrators can have trusted places to work out these dilemmas, without having to break confidences or alarm teachers who work for them.

### A few words if you're considering training

If you don't have control over the "game" or the "deck," but you're hoping to pitch the idea of getting trained as a CFG coach and starting CFG work in your school, here are some choices to consider:

- Visit our [website](#) to select a good Open Training for you.
- Consider bringing a colleague to the training: some of our open trainings offer discounts for bringing another person. It's always wonderful to have a trained partner in continuing the work when you're back at your desk!
- Get some info from NSRF demonstrating the power of CFG work, and present it to your administrators with the specifics and dates of the open training you want to attend.
- And if you ARE the administrator, revisit bullet #1 above. Then in bullet #2, think of someone who might be hesitant to adopt CFG work, and bring them to training. Then you achieve the double-benefit of not only having the colleague to collaborate with, but also you've already "won over" a challenger to the wonderful process of Critical Friends Group work! 🍃



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