

Send “protocol fatigue” out of this league!

By Kevin Mabie, NSRF International Facilitator. drkevinmabie@gmail.com

When you work in the “protocol” business as we NSRF National Facilitators and CFG coaches do, you hear that word a lot, and not always in the most positive circumstances. However, when I hear the word “protocol,” I get excited! A few years ago, a colleague made us buttons that recognized the wearer as a “Certified Protocologist.” I wore my button with pride! But unfortunately, not everyone appreciates protocols like I do.

In most organizations that use protocols to accomplish work, you will run into a certain number of people with “protocol fatigue.” These people may have trouble recognizing protocols as tools to help solve problems more efficiently and effectively and may instead perceive them as “different” or maybe even “weird,” something that isn’t so appealing because it requires new information to be learned and retained. These people are going to exist, so how do we use new and exciting protocols without dismaying our fatigued colleagues?

Be (a little) sneaky

First, I encourage you to consider avoiding using the word “protocol,” when you introduce the practice to new, potentially skeptical, participants. Once, as I worked with a group of teachers, I needed them to engage in conversation around a topic. I broke the topic into three questions, and after dividing my staff into groups of three, I gave everyone time to reflect on each question before giving them approximately 90 seconds to speak. (In a nutshell, I just described the NSRF **Microlabs Protocol**.) However, when I engaged the teachers in this activity, I never used the word protocol and avoided them seeing the printed protocol in my hand. I got the input I needed from the staff, and I’m confident that some teachers used this same “unnamed” instructional strategy in their classrooms soon after.

Show a new use

Sometimes, protocol fatigue occurs when you’re not showing your participants something new. Often, in trainings, I encounter participants who have learned some version of a protocol in the past, or perhaps a member of their staff had been previously trained and the protocol had already been used. This should never be a problem! Protocols are not made to be used only once; instead, they are like tools in a toolbox. Just as we wouldn’t throw away a tool after using it only once, protocols should be kept as well, put safely away until they are needed again. As a facilitator, it is important for me to help participants see the various directions our conversation can go because of the wisdom in the room and because of the focusing ques-

tion for which a presenter may be seeking answers. Unless the participants and the topic are exactly the same, and no work has been completed since a person’s last attempt at the protocol, the protocol will produce different results!

“Activities” vs. “protocols”

Admittedly, some exercises in NSRF protocol handbooks have outcomes that are designed to reveal the same (or approximately the same) outcome. However, these exercises are almost always labeled as an “Activity” rather than as a protocol. When a participant repeats these activities, they may immediately decide that repeating one can be a waste of time...but an open-minded individual will see that it’s not, and as a facilitator, you can help a participant to see this. For example, with an activity such as **Compass Points**, I might assume that if I self-identified as an “East” last time, I will again...but you might be surprised to know that participants often change directions as they mature in their professional development. Even if one keeps the same “work direction,” I hope participants see the benefit of learning about the directions of new participants and hearing how they may describe themselves differently than how you’d categorized them in your own mind. When I know that some participants have experience with a given activity before I lead it, I can talk with them prior to beginning and give them some tips for learning, resulting in more generous and effective participation.

Differentiate!

Lastly, if you run into a real lack of desire to participate in an activity that has been done before, differentiate and appeal to participants’ creative inclinations. At a training awhile back, I had a group that had experienced the **Compass Points Activity** before...but instead of eliminating the activity from our agenda (I thought it was important to revisit for its implications on our common vocabulary), I reshaped it, asking participants to create “party invitations” that appealed to each direction’s partying needs :)

What do you think?

What are some ways you can creatively meet your organization’s needs without advancing protocol fatigue? 💧



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NSRF is a non-profit, professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through a specific variety of professional learning communities. Part of Harmony Education Center, we train educators to coach Critical Friends Group communities. CFG communities use NSRF protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning.

Paid membership helps us continue to provide NSRF materials via our website, as well as support our mission to offer training across the nation and world. We encourage you to support the Lois Butler Scholarship fund so that any teacher could participate in a training regardless of ability to pay our fee.

Shout-out to researchers

Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?



Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We're happy to share research we have on file, but we realize that most of it is dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

Shout-out to EVERYONE!

What do you think? How are we doing with **Connections**, and the new website?

We're working hard to eliminate bugs and add all current members and member-coaches to the new website. We really want to hear feedback from you, whether you have warm or cool feedback to share ... especially if you're having a problem finding something you need!

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