

Shifting Perspectives of Success

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BY:



Ian Caldwell
Senior Fellows



Heidi Park
Inquiry Coach



Sarah Spector

Senior Fellows



Three teachers reflect on what Critical Friends work has taught them about engaging in inquiry, collaboration, and leadership.

Introduction

As often as teaching is portrayed as a solitary endeavor, those who work as

teachers know that a wide range of collaborative relationships are necessary. In our work with the Knowles Teacher Initiative, we've developed ways to collaborate with Teaching Fellows who don't usually work in the same state as us, let alone the same school. Adapting those strategies to collaborate with the colleagues we see daily and face-to-face, however, can be difficult and daunting. So, in July 2017, a group of 15 teachers from all over the country came together to participate in the Critical Friends Group (CFG) New Coaches Training, facilitated by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) and sponsored by Knowles.

Acronyms and Terms

- CFG: Critical Friends Group

- » A Critical Friends Group® community represents a basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving school culture and increasing student achievement.

- Protocol:

- » Structured processes or guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning. Protocols used within a group that shares common values permit an honest, deeply meaningful, and often intimate type of conversation which people are not in the habit of having, building the skills and culture needed for successful collaboration.

- NSRF: National School Reform Faculty

- » NSRF develops the CFG program as well as protocols for educational spaces.

- » Learn more at www.nsrffharmony.org.

Note: Many definitions can be found in the glossary on the NSRF site (NSRF, 2019).

We wanted tools to facilitate conversations and collaborations among our colleagues in our individual school settings and, after the training, everyone was excited about the possibility of using the protocols we practiced to effect changes in our own schools. Yet over the course of the year, many of us felt that we weren't successful in using the tools from this training. This left us wondering: how do we define success? What counts as being successful?

Knowles Senior Fellows are eligible to receive grants from Knowles for Seed Projects—initiatives that are designed to improve education beyond a Senior Fellow's own classroom, including initiatives that enhance science and math

teaching and learning in high schools, build a network of teachers engaged in exploring new ideas, and provide leadership for schools or districts.

Thanks to a Seed Project Grant, most of our group was able to come back together during July 2018 to reflect on our work from the previous year and prepare for the next. As a part of this meeting, we reflected on our individual successes, shared those successes with each other, and considered what we saw and heard from each other. Here, three of us share our thoughts on what success in collaboration can look like and what it means to us.

Heidi: When is it enough?

Collaborating with colleagues can be challenging and messy; in some ways, it's more freeing and faster to work alone. However, with the right level of trust and good communication, collaboration pushes and challenges my assumptions and makes me a better teacher. I wanted tools to transform the collaborative groups at my school into places where we could reflect more deeply about our teaching practice and support each other in our growth as teachers. The 2017 CFG training gave me great ideas for how to structure collaboration with my colleagues and energized my desire to talk more deeply about teaching and learning with them.

When our group of teachers used the reflection protocol to put together all of our 'small' successes, it was clear we had accomplished more than we had thought.

But the idea of starting a full-fledged CFG group was still intimidating, to say the least. While there was some initial enthusiasm among my colleagues about bringing the CFG training to our own school, it didn't transform into action. The already-overextended nature of our teaching schedules made me feel like I would be asking my colleagues to put yet another thing on their plates. At the end of the school year, I felt like I hadn't used the CFG training or even really discussed the nature of collaboration with my colleagues.

It wasn't until our July 2018 meeting that I realized that I did have successes, even if they seemed too small to acknowledge at the time. I modified protocols to use with my colleagues, which gave us the space to acknowledge our lives outside of the course team (and outside of school). This helped us better understand one another, rather than jumping to conclusions. Our department used protocols to refine tasks and examine student work as we worked on vertical alignment. At the end of the year, my colleagues acknowledged that they found the process to be valuable, even though at the time I felt that we hadn't made much progress on our goal. I also ran a protocol with the other 11th-grade homeroom teachers to reflect on a year with our new homeroom structure, which had felt like a flop. But, when our group of teachers used the reflection protocol to put together all of our "small" successes, it was clear we had accomplished more than we had thought.

So this made me wonder: why had I felt that my year after the CFG training was unsuccessful, or rather, not successful enough? A fellow CFG coach reminded me that the work that we do in our schools, outside our classrooms, is in addition to our job as teachers. Because of this, we should view any progress we make in those arenas as successes. Although there were many things I didn't do, there were still successes. The school year was not a "waste" of my initial CFG training, as I had initially feared, and I'm finding it's worthwhile to celebrate the small successes and keep moving the work forward.

Ian: Empowering a colleague

In the fall of 2017, I stepped into the role of mathematics department lead for a two-year rotating position, which administration hoped would make our department stronger and more robust. I had some experience as a leader in a previous school, and I had just completed the CFG training, so it made sense for me to be the first to rotate into the position. I used some of the CFG techniques I had learned in planning and running my department's meetings, but the instance that strikes me as one of my greatest successes was a moment for which I wasn't present.

My principal, Mrs. Julia Gillingham, asked me to support the school's leadership

team to brainstorm ideas for the future. I had previously told her about my experience with the CFG training, and she was curious about our use of NSRF's "Futures" protocol (NSRF, 2014). She and the leadership team had some ideas about ways to improve the school, but they were still in the brainstorming stage and the Futures protocol is designed to provide structure for brainstorming in a large group.

When I sat down with my principal for the pre-conference meeting, I carefully planned out what we would discuss. We worked through how the Futures protocol would run, brainstorming and discussing potential barriers and a few agreements that would be necessary for the protocol to run smoothly. Then as the originally scheduled meeting time approached, something came up for the leadership team and the Futures protocol had to be postponed. When it was eventually rescheduled, I was committed to attending a conference out of town, so I could not facilitate the protocol. I was disappointed!

We decided to have my math colleague, Mr. Rick Alvarez, facilitate the Futures protocol with the leadership team. He had never facilitated a protocol, but he had some experience as a participant in department meetings. I met with Mr. Alvarez twice to coach him on how to present the protocol to the participants and how to establish the agreements. We also explored strategies for making sure the agreements were followed. We discussed what to do if the group diverged from the protocol and how to monitor equity of voice.

Mr. Alvarez was understandably nervous about leading this protocol for a group of people who were in positions of authority. I stressed the importance of his role as the protector of my principal's needs, and we reviewed those needs. Emphasizing that he was there to support our principal helped Mr. Alvarez gain comfort with the idea of leading this protocol.

Although I did not see the results of the protocol or receive any details of the meeting, when I followed up, both Mr. Alvarez and Ms. Gillingham told me they were pleased with how it went. While having the leadership engage in a protocol was nice, the reason I consider this such a success is how it impacted Mr. Alvarez. I'm in my last semester as the math department lead, and Mr. Alvarez is set to

take my place next year. Though he is anxious, he is excited. He has plans and ideas for leading the department. We talk about the responsibilities for the position. The one thing that has not come up since the implementation of the Futures protocol is Mr. Alvarez's worries about leading a group discussion. He knows that with preparation, he can lead a group successfully. The real success is how my own experience with CFG training changed and empowered another teacher.

By sharing my own works in-progress and challenges of practice, I have been able to engage in collaborative inquiry and demonstrate through my actions that I value collaborative inquiry highly. In my classroom, I've been able to elevate my students' voices and contributions.

Sarah: Trusting in the process

I came to the CFG New Coaches Training at the end of my first year of teaching with the goal of gaining more confidence in participating in and facilitating protocol-driven discussion. The Critical Friends framework I learned about in my first year of the Knowles Fellowship resonated with me, and I wanted to share the idea with colleagues at school. I thought that success would be starting and sustaining a collaborative inquiry group in my school and delving deep into problems of practice with my colleagues.

However, there have been many changes in my professional context. I'm now in my third year of teaching, and I'm at a new school. I am not the facilitator of a Critical Friends group. Despite these changes, I have continued to draw value from what I learned and have pushed myself to think creatively about where I can use those skills. By continuing to engage in Critical Friends work, I have gained a broader understanding of what it means to engage in inquiry, collaborate, and lead.

Through the training, I refined my language of collaboration, which gave me

confidence in my new professional setting. I learned the difference between questioning to learn, suggestions in the form of questions, and questions that push thinking forward. This work has emphasized the value of paraphrasing to demonstrate listening and hearing. In my new school, where we are working as a faculty to implement the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program, I lean on these skills each month as we work through our curriculum design.

My classroom has also been a place where I can practice the skills of facilitation while teaching my students to become powerful communicators. Setting agreements together helps my students take ownership in our classroom, and discussion protocols help me shift from teacher-centered talk to more student-driven discussions. By using protocols with my students, I have continued to grow as a facilitator and become more mindful of equity of voice and access for all of my students.

Because I'm not facilitating a CFG at my school, I was challenged to think of other ways that I could apply this framework in my community. I've learned that being vulnerable is a powerful form of collaboration. By sharing my own works-in-progress and challenges of practice, I have been able to engage in collaborative inquiry and demonstrate through my actions that I value collaborative inquiry highly. In my classroom, I've been able to elevate my students' voices and contributions.

In the CFG training, our facilitator told us to trust in the process: we could count on our colleagues to take something valuable from collaborative inquiry work. I have learned to trust the process myself. I do take something valuable from Critical Friends work, regardless of my role.

Conclusion

So what counts as being successful? In many ways, we expect success to look "big"—we need to institute groundbreaking changes in our school settings to be successful. When we see big changes from an outside perspective, we want to know how they were accomplished. What was the one thing that made this change happen? However, from an inside perspective, successes are often initially found in

small places.

We teachers are, as Jim Collins writes, trying to “turn the flywheel”—this huge, heavy metal disk—and at the start it’s slow and sometimes painful. But if we continue pushing consistently, the wheel starts a self-sustaining rotation. It’s all of the little pushes added together that cause a seemingly instantaneous, huge change (Collins, 2019). So if we continue the work, hopefully our flywheel gains momentum and keeps going.

Were we successful in the ways we intended when we left our training in the summer of 2017? Not exactly. None of us are yet at the point where collaborative groups in our schools are self-sustaining or where the entire culture around collaboration at our schools has shifted. But in taking a closer look at the work we’ve been doing, we’ve realized that we are doing the work we set out to do. We are facilitating conversations and collaborations among our colleagues in small but meaningful ways. So were we—are we—successful? Most definitely.

CITATION

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