Nuts and Bolts of Peer Coaching

Great coaches need expertise in coaching and pedagogy. In this mini-course we explore some specific coaching strategies that will make a difference when working with colleagues and teams.

Let's begin by exploring group norms.

**Activity 1 – Setting Group Norms Protocol**

Creating norms for a group establishes a set of ground rules to help teams work together more efficiently.

When establishing norms, consider the following key categories:

- Time
- Decision making
- Listening
- Participation
- Confidentiality
- Expectations

(Delehant and von Frank, 2007)

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**Task 1** - Think of a situation where you might enter a coaching relationship as a coachee. Consider and fill in the table on the following page
<table>
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<tr>
<th>What attributes would you want your coach to use in their work with you.</th>
<th>How would you want your coach to treat you? What would be the qualities you would like to experience? E.g Understand that that I am a busy person</th>
<th>What is the rule they would need to follow in order to treat you this way?. E.g. Arrive on time.</th>
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**Task 2** - Now let’s create our own Norms list for our group. Contribute to a group brainstorm that lists potential norms. Address this question: **How might we work most effectively as a team?**

1. Brainstorm a list of norms you think your group should adopt
2. Look for patterns in the brainstormed list. Combine or restate the norms that are similar.
3. As a group, decide on the five or six norms that will guide the behaviour of your Peer Coaching community.
4. If your group has not included it already, it may want to add this norm: "Accept ownership for your own learning."

Some points to note:

1. The goal of this norm is to encourage all participants to play a positive role in making sure the Peer Coaching Program meets everyone’s needs.
2. If activities are not clear, or if they are not meeting needs, participants may want to raise the issues and work toward resolution.
3. Now that we have our norms, it is important to remember this is a starting point. The list may grow or shrink as we work as a group. To make sure our norms work for our community we will revisit them in each session.

**Task 3** - Consider how the norm-setting process might be applied in your school setting and in your future work.
Activity 2 – Using Protocols

When working with staff in schools there are many protocols you can use. Some of these are listed below.

Read some of the points to consider below when using Protocols in your Peer Coaching and leadership roles.

What they are not...
- They are NOT an orthodoxy. They are NOT the only way to have conversations about student or peer work.
- They are NOT to be imposed on people EVERY time for EVERYTHING.
- They are NOT an extra to be ADDED to teachers' workload.

Rather they are...
- Intended to be useful ways to help groups of teachers talk about their work. They provide a SAFER way of doing difficult work. They require DEPTH of thinking and analysis, include both WARM and COOL feedback, and involve EVERYBODY. Getting feedback on your pedagogy is neither common in schools nor easy to give or receive. The protocols provide a way to do this.
- To be offered to a group as a process for doing this work.
- To be used in a meeting that you have to have anyway, for example, a staff meeting, a team meeting, a learning area meeting, a subject meeting etc AND about some work that the group has to do anyway. There are already times during the year where staff groups plan together, review together...use the protocols to help you do this work.
- Intended to put student work at the centre of such planning and reviewing. That might be new.

When using them...
1. Don’t be so strict re the rules that they stop you saying things because you are not sure if it is in the right ‘section’. They are meant to be liberating not suffocating!

   Remember everyone in the group is helping facilitate so if you are not sure about where you are up to in the process then just ask – ‘I am a bit lost at the moment where are we up to?’ or ‘I am not sure if this is a clarifying question but I want to ask it. We can hold it for later if you want…..’.

   It may well be that a team develops into such a mature work group that it can have unstructured conversations where the norms are known and adhered to and the work gets done and done well. However a group will NOT stay like that forever. In fact, groups probably only ever have moments where this is true. So as you feel that a group is having more debate than dialogue, more opinion giving than information seeking, individuals are having too much to say and others not anything then it might be good to reintroduce a protocol to help the group refocus.

2. Be inventive. We hope that groups (you) will start to adapt the protocols and to make up new protocols. This could be to ensure they are pertinent to your particular purpose and your unique settings (for example involving your local community).

   Ensure that, as best you can, have a range and depth of expertise at the table with regard to the work in question. For example if the work is school science then we have found that people from outside the learning area provide new and interesting insights into the work that might not exist within the school science culture. On the other hand having people with a knowledge of science is also important. Otherwise the group may not go deep enough into the content of the work.
Protocol Facilitation Tips

1. Take some time to clarify terminology. For example, what is a clarifying question? How is it different from a probing question (both in terms of structure and purpose)?

Clarifying questions are for the person asking them. They ask the presenter "who, what, where, when, and how." These are NOT "why" questions. They can be answered quickly and succinctly, often with a phrase or two.

Probing questions are for the person answering them. They ask the presenter "why" (among other things), and are open-ended. They take longer to answer, and often require deep thought on the part of the presenter before she speaks. The person asking the probing question doesn’t know (or even assume) an answer to the question being asked, and doesn’t have an investment in how the question is answered.

2. Alert people to the likely places/points in the protocol which will feel awkward like when the group gives warm and cool feedback and speaks as if the presenters aren’t in the room. This protocol requires the group to talk about the presenters in the third person, almost as if they are not there. As awkward as this may feel at first, it often opens up a rich conversation. Remind the group that it is their job to give feedback, and to offer an analysis of the issue or questions presented. It is not necessary to solve a problem or to offer a definitive answer.

3. Suggest that the presenters physically sit back from the group so as not to have any eye contact when the group gives their warm and cool feedback. Remind the presenters to listen in a non-defensive manner. They might listen for: new ideas, perspectives, and approaches; the group’s analysis of their question and related issues; and/or the assumptions implicit in the conversation. Remind the presenters that this is not supposed to be about the presenters themselves, but about a question they have raised.

4. Remind the group that the point of the last step is for the presenters to talk about what were, for them, the most significant feedback, comments, ideas and questions they heard. It is NOT for the presenters to give a "blow by blow" response to the group’s conversation, nor is it to defend or further explain themselves. They can also share any new thoughts or questions they had while listening to the group.

5. Remind people that they can never know everything, but that they can know enough to be helpful. There will be much that the group says that won’t be useful because they don’t know enough about the context, but that there will be things they say and questions they raise that ONLY outsiders who don’t know every nuance of the context can say or ask.

6. Be explicit about your role as a facilitator. Will you ever join in on the conversation? etc.

7. Remember to debrief each feedback session as a whole group. Debriefing the process is key. Don’t short-change this step.
Some useful protocols are listed below. All of these protocols are in the Nuts and Bolts of Peer Coaching Handouts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protocol Name</th>
<th>Possible uses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chalk talk Protocol</td>
<td>Working as a group to brainstorm a topic ensuring all members have equal opportunity to think deeply and participate equally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms Protocol</td>
<td>Forming a new relationship with a coach, a group or a committee, or when forming a new class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Cue Card</td>
<td>Coaching Conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wows and Wonders</td>
<td>Reviewing peer programs, ideas or concepts, or reviewing student work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback Model</td>
<td>Use in all general feedback situations. Great for students to learn positive feedback methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Road Block</td>
<td>Personal reflection to get through a roadblock that is stopping progression on a particular issue or project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probing Questions</td>
<td>Use with Coaching Cue Card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuning Protocol</td>
<td>To review student work samples, programming and peer work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Final Word</td>
<td>The purpose of this discussion format is to give each person in the group an opportunity to have their ideas, understandings, and perspective enhanced by hearing from others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zones of Comfort</td>
<td>To describe the need to move outside their comfort zones.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Choose a Protocol**

**Task 1** - After reading through the protocols list and discussing other protocols you may already use, find a protocol that you think might suit a situation that you will have to work through in the coming months and answer the questions. Write answers to these questions in your journal then discuss in pairs. You will find all the protocol in their full format in the ‘Peer Coaching Handbook’.

- Which protocol will you use?
- Why will it help to develop a professional dialogue around this issue or project?
- When will you use it?
- How will you prepare for the use of it?
Activity 3 - An Example Protocol – The Final Word

The Final Word Protocol is a great example of how a protocol can diffuse a heated conversation and yet support all voices and opinions to be heard.

Task 1 - Use the protocol and example text from the Nuts and Bolts of Peer Coaching Handouts.

Debrief this experience with your facilitator.

Activity 4 – Course Reflection Activity

‘Give one – Get One’ Reflection Activity

Participants move to as many people in the room as possible, sharing one of their ideas and getting one idea, before moving to the next person. The focus statement for this activity is:

Something about Protocols that you will commit to doing from tomorrow?
Chalk Talk Protocol

Chalk Talk is a silent way to do reflection, generate ideas, check on learning, develop projects or solve problems. It can be used productively with any group—students, faculty, workshop participants, committees. Because it is done completely in silence, it gives groups a change of pace and encourages thoughtful contemplation. It can be an unforgettable experience.

Format

**Time:** Varies according to need; can be from 5 minutes to an hour.

**Materials:** Chalkboard and chalk or paper roll on the wall and markers. This can also be done online using a collaborative white board web tool as well.

Process

1. The facilitator explains VERY BRIEFLY that chalk talk is a silent activity. No one may talk at all and anyone may add to the chalk talk as they please. You can comment on other people’s ideas simply by drawing a connecting line to the comment. It can also be very effective to say nothing at all except to put finger to lips in a gesture of silence and simply begin with #2.

2. The facilitator writes a relevant question or questions in a circle on the board. Using two questions that flow is a great idea. Sample questions:
   - What did you learn today?
   - So What? or Now What?
   - What do you think about social responsibility and schooling?
   - How can we involve the community in the school, and the school in community?
   - How can we keep the noise level down in this room?
   - What do you want to tell the scheduling committee?
   - What do you know about Croatia?
   - How are decimals used in the world?

3. The facilitator either hands a piece of chalk to everyone, or places many pieces of chalk at the board and hands several pieces to people at random.

4. People write as they feel moved. There are likely to be long silences—that is natural, so allow plenty of wait time before deciding it is over.

How the facilitator chooses to interact with the Chalk Talk influences its outcome. The facilitator can stand back and let it unfold or expand thinking by:
   - circling other interesting ideas, thereby inviting comments to broaden
   - writing questions about a participant comment
   - adding his/her own reflections or ideas
   - connecting two interesting ideas/comments together with a line and adding a question mark.

Actively interacting invites participants to do the same kinds of expansions. A Chalk Talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection or a spirited, but silent, exchange of ideas. It has been known to solve vexing problems, surprise everyone with how much is collectively known about something, get an entire project planned, or give a committee everything it needs to know without any verbal sparring.

5. When it’s done, it’s done.

*Originally developed by Hilton Smith, Foxfire Fund; adapted for the NSRF by Marylyn Wentworth. Archived from National Schools Reform Faculty: [http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/chalk_talk.pdf](http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/chalk_talk.pdf)*
Creating Norms Protocol

Creating norms for a group establishes a set of ground rules to help teams work together more efficiently. When establishing norms, consider the following key categories:

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- Decision making
- Listening
- Participation
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Now that we have our norms, it is important to remember this is a starting point. The list may grow or shrink as we work as a group. To make sure our norms work for our community we will revisit them in each session.
Coaching Cue Card

Step 1 - Active Listening
• Focus on the speaker and supporting their learning
• Block out all competing thoughts
• Lean forward and nodding
• Take notes
• Use body language that shows empathy.

Step 2 - Paraphrasing
• Is restating what was stated
• Is used to check for understanding
• Clarifies what was heard by summarizing
• Indicates acceptance and encouragement
• Establishes a relationship between the speakers

So what I hear you saying is … So what you are wondering is… Let me see if I have understood you… So what you are thinking...

Step 3 - Clarifying Questions
• Lead to a clear picture or understanding of a topic or idea
• Are factual
• Are answered quickly
• Are used to gather information

How did you… What…?

Step 4 - Probing Questions
• Are thought provoking
• Encourage deeper thinking
• Are often open-ended, not yes/no questions
• Are solution focused

Where is your student/class now? Where do you want them to be as a result of this? What will they know and be able to do? What could you do? What else is possible? Could I make some suggestions? What do you need to know and be able to do to achieve that? Are there other strategies that you could use to …? What might the next step be? What did you learn from that?

The distinction between clarifying questions and probing questions is very difficult for most people working with protocols. So is the distinction between probing questions and recommendations for action. The basic distinctions are:

Clarifying Questions are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that the participants can ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol. Clarifying questions are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter’s dilemma. They have brief, factual answers, and don’t provide any new “food for thought” for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the presenter have to think before s/he answers? If so, it’s almost certainly a probing question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:
• How much time does the project take?
• How were the students grouped?
• What resources did the students have available for this project?

Probing Questions are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a probing question doesn’t have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself saying “Don’t you think you should …?” you’ve gone beyond probing questions. The presenter often doesn’t have a ready answer to a genuine probing question. Since probing questions are the hardest to create productively, we offer the following suggestions:
• Check to see if you have a “right” answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don’t ask it.
• Refer to the presenter’s original question/focus point. What did s/he ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
• Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter’s agenda.
• Sometimes a simple “why…?” asked as an advocate for the presenter’s success can be very effective, as can several why questions asked in a row.
• Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don’t avoid risk, but don’t push the presenter into the “danger zone.”
• Think of probing questions as being on a continuum, from recommendation to most effective probing question. For example [on next page — from an actual Consultancy session in which a teacher was trying to figure out why the strongest math students in the class weren’t buying in and doing their best work on what seemed to be interesting math “problems of the week”]:
  1) Could you have students use the rubric to assess their own papers? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
2) What would happen if students used the rubric to assess their own work? (recommendation re-stated as a *probing* question)
3) What do the students think is an interesting math problem? (good probing question)
4) What would have to change for students to work more for themselves? (better probing question)

In summary, good probing questions:
• are general and widely useful
• don’t place blame on anyone
• allow for multiple responses
• help create a paradigm shift
• empower the person with the dilemma to solve his or her own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
• avoid yes/no responses
• are usually brief
• elicit a slow response
• move thinking from reaction to reflection
• encourage taking another party’s perspective

Some final hints for crafting probing questions. Try the following questions and/or question stems. Some of them come from Charlotte Danielson’s *Pathwise* work, in which she refers to them as “mediational questions.”
• Why do you think this is the case?
• What would have to change in order for…?
• What do you feel is right in your heart?
• What do you wish…?
• What’s another way you might…?
• What would it look like if…?
• What do you think would happen if…?
• How was…different from…?
• What sort of an impact do you think…?
• What criteria did you use to…?
• When have you done/experienced something like this before?
• What might you see happening in your classroom if…?
• How did you decide/determine/conclude…?
• What is your hunch about …?
• What was your intention when ….?
• What do you assume to be true about ….?
• What is the connection between…and…?
• What if the opposite were true? Then what?
• How might your assumptions about…have influenced how you are thinking about…?
• Why is this such a dilemma for you?

Some Examples of Probing Questions:
• Why is a “stand-and-deliver” format the best way to introduce this concept?
• How do you think your own comfort with the material has influenced your choice of instructional strategies?
• What do the students think is quality work?
• You have observed that this student’s work lacks focus – what makes you say that?

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community such as a Critical Friends Group® and facilitated by a skilled coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsrfharmony.org.
• What would the students involved say about this issue?
• How have your perspectives on current events influenced how you have structured this activity?
• Why aren’t the science teachers involved in planning this unit?
• Why do you think the team hasn’t moved to interdisciplinary curriculum planning?
• What would understanding of this mathematical concept look like? How would you know students have “gotten it”?
• Why did allowing students to create their own study questions cause a problem for you?
• Why do you think the expected outcomes of this unit weren’t communicated to parents?
• What was your intention when you assigned students to oversee the group activity in this assignment?
• What evidence do you have from this student’s work that her ability to reach substantiated conclusions has improved?
• How might your assumptions about the reasons why parents aren’t involved have influenced what you have tried so far?
• How do you think your expectations for students might have influenced their work on this project?
• What do you think would happen if you restated your professional goals as questions?
• What other approaches have you considered for communicating with parents about their children’s progress?
The Wows and Wonders Protocol

This protocol is designed to help coaches gain understanding about their work, to promote reflective practice and to learn from each other. The protocol can be used to examine student work or educator practice. Form groups of four to six participants and use the following protocol.

**Roles**

- **Presenter:** Shares coaching work, answers questions and poses a question or problem for the group to provide feedback or analyze. (Use the example of your coaching work that you posted to the Discussion Board.)

- **Facilitator:** Keeps the process moving, explains the steps of the protocol, asks questions, listens, takes notes and keeps time. Until groups become familiar with the process, the facilitator may need to help participants rephrase or withdraw inappropriate comments or questions.

- **Listeners:** Listen, take notes, ask clarifying and probing questions and reflect on the protocol. The listeners try to give feedback to the presenter and try to help the presenter analyze the issue or question that was presented. It isn’t essential that the listeners solve the problem posed by the presenter.

**Protocol Steps**

- **Step 1 Introduction** - The facilitator provides an overview of the protocol and its purpose. Time is established for each step. The facilitator clarifies what to do if the group is not staying within the time limits for each step of the protocol or if inappropriate comments are made.

- **Step 2 Presentation** - The presenter introduces the work. This includes an explanation to help colleagues understand the context and goal and includes anything else that is relevant. Then the presenter poses one or two questions they have about their Learning Activity.

- **Step 3 Reflection** - The group spends time in silent examination of the work and the presentation. This is an opportunity for the participants to reflect and write notes or questions. (5 minutes)

- **Step 4 Clarifying Questions** - Colleagues ask clarifying questions about the work. These questions help the reader understand what the work consists of and how it was accomplished. The presenter answers the questions factually. (Clarifying questions are usually factual questions that can easily be answered by the presenter.) (5 minutes)

- **Step 5 Wows** - The presenter moves out of the discussion and silently takes notes during the Wows. Colleagues comment on the “wows” of the work. They state the understandings gained from looking at the work. They describe what the work demonstrates to them and what insights were gained. (5 minutes)

- **Step 6 Wonders** - The presenter continues to silently take notes listening for new ideas and perspectives. Colleagues comment on the “wonders” of the work using probing questions whenever possible. For example, “I wonder if you might have more time for coaching on lesson improvement if you held weekly technology sessions on how to use Microsoft Word tables or resizing a photo?” Colleagues also comment on other pertinent questions the work raises. They discuss how this influences their work.
as coaches and what could be done next time to deepen the quality of the interaction. The presenter is silent and takes notes. (5–10 minutes)

- **Step 7 Feedback** - The presenter has time to reflect on what he/she learned. The presenter reflects on how he/she may use the comments provided and what prompted him/her to think differently about the work presented. The presenter should not use this time to defend their work or further their actions. (5–10 minutes)

- **Step 8: Debrief** - Participants and presenter reflect on the protocol
  
  - What was helpful about the process?
  - What was difficult?
  - How could you use the protocol in other settings?
Feedback model

This is a very simple methodology to give feedback to people. It is useable in one-on-one situations or in groups. Before starting the protocol, ensure all participants are aware of what is expected of them, and how they should behave.

Using the feedback model

Try to be:

- Be generous in the way that you recognise/confirm the positive actions.
- Be honest. People resent recognition that is not true
- Be specific when you outline the areas for attention.
- Try to limit your feedback. People can only work on one or two areas at a time. Look at the leverage point that will make the greatest difference.
- Use **AND** rather than *but, however or a pause...*
Coaching Roadblocks

**Analyze Your Own Roadblock and put in place actions to help move forward.** Now you will identify and analyze your own coaching roadblock. Where possible, use a coaching partner to coach you through possible solution scenarios to step around or solve your road block.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps for Problem</th>
<th>Your Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Define the problem</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Gather information.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Identify relevant facts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. Identify the causes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Discuss possible cause with others.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Try putting yourself in the other person's shoes.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think of all the possible causes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3. Generate possible solutions</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Research ideas on the Internet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Ask collaborating teachers and other coaches for ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Keep in mind what you can and cannot control.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Road Block Solution Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. Decide on a solution</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Try to improve the situation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make the solution realistic.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>5. Checkpoint</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Write a goal and check-point to determine if the solution is working.</td>
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<tr>
<th>6. Plan</th>
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<td>• Identify action steps to solve the problem.</td>
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### Action Steps:

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<th>Who</th>
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<th>Goal:</th>
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### Goal:

### Checkpoint:
The Tuning Protocol – Warm and Cold Feedback

The Tuning Protocol (as in ‘fine tune’) is a useful tool for allowing a variety of voices and perspectives to be shared, while focusing intently on a specific presentation. The time frame may vary, but generally adhering to a strict time for each segment is advised. We will use the following:

**INTRODUCTION** (2 - 3 minutes)
- Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, norms and agenda.

**PRESENTATION** (5 minutes)
- In this segment, the presentation is made. This includes the context for student work (or whatever the document is) and the samples of student work (or the planning instrument etc). There is NO questioning at this time.

**CLARIFYING QUESTIONS** (5 minutes)
- Participants have an opportunity to ask ‘clarifying’ questions - to get pieces of information that may have been omitted in the presentation and that they feel would help them to understand the context of the presentation. The facilitator should be sure to limit the questions to those that are ‘clarifying’.

**PAUSE FOR REFLECTION** (2-3 minutes)
- This is to allow participants to write down feedback items they would like to share - generally, no more than one example of each.

**WARM FEEDBACK** (3 minutes)
- Participants reinforce/call attention to aspects they think are especially strong; recognise the acknowledgement of problems and issues by the presenters; ask for more detail on something they think is important. This is not about saying ‘good presentation’. It is about being descriptive and helping the presenter see value they might not have seen, themselves, in their presentation. Presenters take notes, but DO NOT respond.

**COOL FEEDBACK (NOT CRUEL)** (3 minutes)
- This is an opportunity for participants to pose questions that make them wonder, want to know more about, are confused about. They may also share concerns, raise issues or other ideas that they think are worth exploring etc. Presenters take notes and DO NOT respond yet.

**RESPONSE AND OPEN CONVERSATION** (5 minutes)
- This is an opportunity for the presenter(s) to respond to the questions and comments. During this segment, other participants are quiet.
REMAINING TIME (If applicable)

- Additional questions, comments and open conversation.

FEEDBACK ON THE PROCESS (2 - 3 minutes)

- The full group provides feedback (debrief) on the process.

Giving feedback

- **Warm** is explicit - helps identify strengths
- **Cool** raises issues or potential questions - shows how to improve
- **Hard** is again explicit - raises issues to promote broader, deeper thinking about work
Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger: Constructing Your Zone Map

The Zones Exercise comes from an unknown source (to me) within the NSRF organization. I first experienced it at the Fall, 2000, Critical Friends Group Symposium in Boca Raton, Florida. I have found the exercise useful and have tried to make notes for others. I hope the originator will claim the invention, and that others will add to this useful exercise as they discover new applications. Marylyn Wentworth, January, 2001.

1. Draw a diagram of concentric circles in the following manner:
   a. The middle circle is Comfort, the second is Risk, the third is Danger.
   b. Consider the various aspects of your work (as a CFG Coach, for example). Think about the aspects that feel really comfortable to you, those that feel like there is some risk involved, but generally positive, and those aspects that you know get your hackles up, make you feel defensive, cloud your judgment, make you want to retreat.
   c. Decide on the size of each Zone based on your consideration. Do you work a lot in your Comfort Zone, your Risk Zone? Do you work only a little in your Danger Zone? Make the size of the Zones reflect the quantity of time you work there.

2. Think about the different activities you do and/or affective domains in which you work (i.e. facilitating groups, leading protocols, designing meetings, guiding peer observation, responding to conflicts between group members…). Make a list if it helps.

3. Put each activity or affective domain into the Zone that best represents your sense of relative Comfort, Risk or Danger.

![Diagram of Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger](image-url)
Observations on the Zones

1. **The Comfort Zone** is usually a place where we feel at ease, with no tension, have a good grip on the topic, like to hear from others about the topic, know how to navigate occasional rough spots with ease. It is also a place to retreat to from the Danger Zone. For example, one of your Danger Zone aspects may be when people start disagreeing with you and even disrespect. You might find that when that happens you retreat into your Comfort aspect of listening and not intervening, or even find a way to divert the conversation to a topic that is in your Comfort Zone.

2. **The Risk Zone** is the most fertile place for learning. It is where most people are willing to take some risks, not know everything, or sometimes not know anything at all, but clearly know they want to learn and will take the risks necessary to do so. It is where people open up to other people with curiosity and interest, and where they will consider options or ideas they haven’t thought of before.

3. **Generally it is not a good idea to work from either your own Danger Zone or anyone else’s.** That area is so full of defenses, fears, red-lights, desire for escape, etc, that it requires too much energy and time to accomplish anything from that Zone. The best way to work when you find yourself there is to own that it is a Danger Zone and work on some strategies to move into the Risk Zone (either on your own or with colleagues).

For example, if I feel my anger rising and my body getting rigid when someone says it’s time we really clamped down on standardized tests and taught to them right now before the kids failed any more and it is suggested that our CFG should work in that direction as our main focus, I recognize the signs of being in my Danger Zone and know I probably won’t be rational when I speak. Therefore I need a strategy. In this case, my strategy will be to ask calmly, “What are the advantages for the students if we do that? What are the advantages for teaching and learning? What are the disadvantages?” Then I have to listen and list. I can’t trust myself to do more than ask questions until I become more rational and this isn’t such a high level Danger Zone for me.

How to Apply the Zones Productively: Connection to Dilemmas

*The Consultancy*

1. Review your Zone Map and select a dilemma represented there.

2. Make some notes to give more detail to the dilemma. Notice what Zone the dilemma appears in, or if it is a complex dilemma and has aspects in several Zones.

3. Break into triads and plan your order and time for three Consultancies.

4. As you present your dilemma, use your Zone Map as a reference for the group. They may find fertile ground for probing questions or feedback in your Map, and can see how your dilemma relates to other aspects of your work.

*Alternative to the Consultancy*

1. Write a dilemma about your work before you come to the Zones Workshop.

2. After you have done the Zones Map, divide into triads.

3. Take turns reading your dilemmas aloud to each other.
4. Discuss the following questions for each person (20 minutes each):
   a. How does your dilemma relate to your Zone Map? What Zone(s) is the dilemma happening in for you? For others related to your dilemma?
   b. Are you working in your Danger Zone? Someone else’s? Do you need to know about other people’s Danger Zones?
   c. If your dilemma is in your Danger Zone (or someone else’s), how can you move those issues into a Risk or Comfort Zone? How might this movement contribute to solving the dilemma?
   d. What would the other people who contribute to or are affected by your dilemma say about your dilemma?
Adapted from the original by Jennifer Fischer-Mueller and Gene Thompson-Grove for the NSRF.

Purpose
The purpose of this discussion format is to give each person in the group an opportunity to have their ideas, understandings, and perspective enhanced by hearing from others. With this format, the group can explore an article, clarify their thinking, and have their assumptions and beliefs questioned in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue.

Roles
Facilitator / timekeeper (who also participates); participants

Facilitation
Have participants identify one “most” significant idea from the text (underlined or highlighted ahead of time), stick to the time limits, avoid dialogue, have equal sized circles so all small groups finish at approximately the same time.

Process
1. Sit in a circle, and identify a facilitator/time-keeper.

2. Each person needs to have one “most” significant idea from the text underlined or highlighted in the article. It is often helpful to identify a “back up” quote as well.

3. The first person begins by reading what “struck him or her the most” from the article. Have this person refer to where the quote is in the text - one thought or quote only. Then, in less than 3 minutes, this person describes why that quote struck him or her. For example, why does s/he agree/disagree with the quote, what questions does s/he have about that quote, what issues does it raise for him or her, what does s/he now wonder about in relation to that quote?

4. Continuing around the circle each person responds to that quote and what the presenter said, briefly, in less than a minute. The purpose of the response is:
   • to expand on the presenter's thinking about the quote and the issues raised for him or her by the quote,
   • to provide a different look at the quote,
   • to clarify the presenter’s thinking about the quote, and/or
   • to question the presenter’s assumptions about the quote and the issues raised (although at this time there is no response from the presenter).

5. After going around the circle with each person having responded for less than one minute, the person that began has the “final word.” In no more than one minute the presenter responds to what has been said. Now what is s/he thinking? What is his or her reaction to what s/he has heard?
Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community such as a Critical Friends Group® and facilitated by a skilled coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsrharmony.org.

6. The next person in the circle then begins by sharing what struck him or her most from the text. Proceed around the circle, responding to this next presenter’s quote in the same way as the first presenter’s. This process continues until each person has had a round with his or her quote.

7. For each round, allow about 8 minutes (circles of 5 participants: presenter 3 minutes, response 1 minute for 4 people, final word for presenter 1 minute). The role of the facilitator is to keep the process moving, keep it clear and directed to the article, and keep time so everyone gets an opportunity for a round. Total time is about a forty minutes for a group of 5 (32 minutes for a group of 4, 48 minutes for a group of 6). End by debriefing the process in your small group.
Luci considers her options as she designs the agenda. Teachers are at odds with one another about student discipline. They have different procedures from classroom to classroom, and schoolwide practices vary. Some teachers feel others are not meeting their responsibilities for disciplining students. At the next day's meeting, the group will explore the assumptions that inform their different perspectives.

Conflict in schools is not unique. All schools have internal conflicts relating to differences of opinion, contrasting ideologies, diversity, change, issues of civility, scarcity, or power and control. In fact, Stephen Ball (1987) wrote, "Schools are arenas of struggle, poorly coordinated and ideologically diverse, making conflict, not cooperation, the norm." Luci knows that conflicts can be constructive or destructive. What makes the difference is how they are addressed. She knows she must facilitate this meeting in such a way that cognitive conflicts can be expressed and affective conflict avoided.

Cognitive conflict is disagreement about ideas and approaches. Issues are separated from people. Cognitive conflict is a characteristic of high-performing groups. Affective conflict is interpersonal, with either person-to-person or group-to-group antagonism. Affective conflicts sap energy, sidetrack tasks, and block work.

As long as disagreements among team members focus on substantive, issue-related differences of opinion, they tend to improve faculty effectiveness. Such cognitive conflict is a natural part of a properly functioning team. Cognitive conflict occurs as team members examine, compare, and reconcile these differences. Some cognitive conflict is necessary to improve school functioning and student learning. It focuses attention on the assumptions that may underlie a particular issue.

Affective conflict lowers a faculty's effectiveness by fostering hostility, distrust, cynicism, avoidance, and apathy among team members. This type of conflict focuses on personalized anger or resentment usually directed at individuals or groups rather than ideas.

As can be seen in the chart below, schools improve when group members disagree about ideas without feeling interpersonal tension. Three resources are required to work productively with conflict: group member skills, meeting protocols, and appropriate use of processing time.

**Group member skills**

In Adaptive Schools work, we identify three sets of basic group member skills critical to resolving conflict:

- **Sending:** stating the intention of communications; revealing all relevant information; providing facts, ideas, opinions, suggestions; announcing modification of one's views; using proper voice; owning ideas ("I feel," not "they say"); and making clear statements of advocacy.

- **Receiving:** checking for understanding by paraphrasing, pausing, inquiring, and probing for specificity.

- **Paying attention to oneself and others:** being aware of one's own thoughts and feelings; staying alert to others' voice patterns, nonverbal communications, and use of space; maintaining consciousness about group task and mood.

**Meeting protocols**

Certain strategies provide psychological safety. This feeling of safety is necessary for candid engagement with others. Safety for some can mean knowing one is protected from verbal attack. Or it can mean having a sense that one's contributions are recognized, perhaps not agreed with, but understood. It can mean not losing face, not being embarrassed, or avoiding feelings of inequality. It can mean freedom from a fear of retribution. For some members it can mean time to reflect before talking. It can mean conversations not dominated by the voices of a few highly verbal members. Very importantly, it also means freedom from having to be certain. One of the greatest barriers to learning and working effectively with conflicts is believing that one must speak with certainty.

Without protocols, groups tend to either avoid hard-to-talk-about topics or do so in ways that evoke affective conflict. Protocols provide safety by shaping conversations. They provide a focus for talking, name strategies to be used, indicate the cognitive skills required, and set boundaries for behavior and topic. Members need a sense of safety to
risk putting ideas on the table and to participate, but protocols go beyond comfort. Members are likely to be uncomfortable. This is to be expected, is normal, and is valuable - discomfort often is a window to learning.

Facilitators choose strategies along a continuum of loose to tight structures depending on the group’s skills, members’ emotional intensity, and the cognitive complexity of the issue. Two highly structured protocols are:

**First word/last word.** Individuals read a section of relevant text, preferably before the meeting. Individuals highlight portions that have special meaning for them. In small groups, each person in turn shares an item he or she highlighted, but does not comment on it. Group members take turns commenting on the item named with no cross talk. The person who named the item then shares his or her thinking about the item and gets the last word. The pattern is repeated around the table.

**Assumptions wall.** This structure surfaces assumptions. Assumptions drive perceptions, positions, logic, and feelings. They are rarely stated, and when they become public, members can examine the rationale, become less judgmental, and understand one another better.

1. Members list their assumptions related to a topic. Luci probably will use discipline.
2. Members choose the assumption that most drives their thinking related to the topic, write it on a sentence strip in eight to 12 words, and post it on a wall.
3. Group members inquire about the assumptions in round-robin turns.

Each member can ask about one of the assumptions or may pass. Some areas for inquiry about assumptions are: origin, inclusiveness, values, importance, and consequences. Questions are asked in an approachable voice and might be phrased this way: "I'm curious about what makes this assumption important to you." "Help me understand the values you feel this assumption represents." "Are there conditions in which you think this assumption might not apply?" "Can you help me understand your thinking by sharing what data you are basing this on?" Each inquiry starts a brief conversation between the inquirer and the assumption-maker so as to reveal the deeper meaning behind the assumption. The facilitator guides and intervenes if necessary to keep the tone of the questioning about discovery, not challenge.

**Processing time**

The third resource necessary for effective conversations is what Michael Doyle and David Straus (1993) call a proper allocation of gum and chewing. "Gum" is the content of the meeting. "Chewing" is the interactive process and strategies you provide with which participants can reflect, hear others, state thoughts and opinions, and generate and test ideas. How much "gum" and how much "chewing" you provide becomes a dominant concern in meeting design.

As a rule of thumb, the more emotion involved, the greater the complexity, and the larger the ideological challenges, the more process time is required. Although content-process ratios can't be described in percentages, a logical progression of increased processing time exists in proportion to the factors noted above.

The purposes and types of processes will vary according to the meeting goal. To generate information, meetings are either information-intensive or composed of strategies in which the group assembles data. Organizing information demands greater cognitive complexity and cooperation. Members must clarify understandings, search for and agree to categorization schemes, and develop some initial levels of consensus. As the challenges grow more complex, different protocols and extended periods of processing may be required. For emotionally challenging issues, the group must move slowly to ensure members are understood.

Luci feels secure in the faculty's ability to communicate effectively, thus helping the teachers stay free from affective conflict as they work through their differences. One of her goals will be to keep members focused on principles, not preferences. She will use strategies that allow members to speak freely and challenge the premises of other members' viewpoints without the threat of anger, resentment, or retribution. And, essential to achieving her goals, she will be strategic with processing time.

**References**


**About the Author**

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