



ONE PROTOCOL, TWO WAYS

Most protocols are flexible and can be used or adapted for multiple purposes. The Descriptive Consultancy (McDonald et al., 2007), developed by Nancy Mohr, is a variation on The Consultancy, developed by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans, and Faith Dunne at the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

Consultancies, in all forms, are protocols designed to support collaborative problem solving. One of the key aspects of the consultancy, in all its variations, is that advice, if given at all, is withheld until participants examine the challenge thoroughly. As a professional learning tool, it is one of the best for helping people develop the skill of asking good questions.

The use of probing questions, considered by many to be the most powerful dimension of this protocol, is a skill that practitioners readily apply in all sorts of interactions. The key to a good probing question is to ensure that it helps the person answering to think more deeply about the issue. The questioner shouldn't impose his or her own interpretations or solutions.

Probing questions often help people gain insight into a problem that is far more helpful than suggestions. It is also true that once the presenter shares those additional insights, whatever suggestions are made are far more likely to be on target.

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THE DESCRIPTIVE CONSULTANCY: IN-PERSON VERSION

PURPOSE

As with the original Consultancy, the Descriptive Consultancy has two purposes: helping practitioners think through a dilemma that they present and expanding their power to address it. Nancy Mohr liked this variation and used it especially to help groups of educators become facilitative leaders and gain the opportunity to learn how others frame their dilemmas.

DETAILS AND GUIDELINES

The protocol requires about one hour to explore each dilemma, though times vary depending on the number of participants. The setting typically involves either one group of 10 to 12 or smaller groups of three to five meeting in a space where multiple conversations can be carried on simultaneously. Smaller groups — using a more constrained time frame — might consult on all its members' dilemmas in turn.

STEPS

- 1. Presentation.** The presenter describes the dilemma, laying out its different dimensions as he or she sees them, including previous attempts to address it. *(10 minutes)*
- 2. Clarifying questions.** Other members of the group, acting in the role of consultants, ask questions designed to elicit information they think they need in order to consult more effectively. *(5 minutes)*
- 3. Reflecting back descriptively.** The presenter is silent while each of the consultants describes the content of the presentation, beginning with the facilitator's prompt, "What did you hear in this presentation?" The facilitator then adds prompts to spur additional go-rounds in order to ensure the fullest possible description of the problem and its complexities. Such prompts might include: "What seems important to the presenter?" "What, if anything, surprised you?" and "What does this problem seem to be about?" This is also a good time for participants to pose probing questions. Participants in the go-rounds are asked to pass if someone else has already offered their reflection. *(10-15 minutes)*
- 4. Response.** The presenter briefly responds to the consultants' expressed understandings of the problem and provides further clarification of the problem as needed. *(5 minutes)*
- 5. Brainstorming.** The presenter is again silent while the consultants brainstorm possible solutions or next steps, saying things like "What if ...?" or "Have you thought about ...?" This step often takes the form of open conversation among the consultants,

and sometimes in the third person (as if the presenter were not in the same room), a strategy that often helps the presenter listen more fully and the consultants speak more freely. *(10-15 minutes)*

6. Response. The presenter responds again, this time to answer any questions that might have arisen in brainstorming and to acknowledge any shifts in how he or she views the problem. Here, the presenter does not so much answer the group's questions as present his or her new insights gained during listening. *(5 minutes)*

7. Debriefing. The facilitator asks the presenter and participants about their roles: "How did it feel to be the presenter?" or "How did it feel to be the consultant?" The facilitator ends with, "Sometimes people other than the presenter learn something important from the Descriptive Consultancy — something useful in their own context. Does anyone have something to share along those lines?" *(5 minutes)*

FACILITATION TIPS

- When the Descriptive Consultancy is conducted in multiple small groups, the facilitator oversees the process as a whole, having first modeled the process by allowing participants to observe. During the process, the facilitator should monitor groups' use of the steps and intervene if they are not being followed.
- In explaining and monitoring, the facilitator should emphasize the importance of Step 3: Reflecting back a description, rather than making a judgment or proposing a solution. This is a delicate step for the facilitator, who must gently nudge the group to remain descriptive.
- The facilitator should also emphasize Step 4, which involves the presenter's responding to the way the consultants understood the problem. The facilitator might tell the group: "The reason we reflect back and listen carefully to the reflections is to acknowledge that people inevitably have different takes on a complex problem. The power of the Descriptive Consultancy is in learning from these different takes." The facilitator may ask the presenter at the end of Step 4 if he or she wants to reframe or restate the problem at this time.
- Sometimes it is useful for a team to present a problem for consultation. This has the benefit for team members to become clearer about the problem as they think through how to present it.

THE DESCRIPTIVE CONSULTANCY: ONLINE VERSION

PURPOSE

The purpose of the online version is the same as the face-to-face one but allows participants more time to reflect on reframing of the problem.

DETAILS AND GUIDELINES

This online version requires two weeks and works best with groups of up to 10 participants. In the online directions, the facilitator must allow time for participants to ponder the dilemma the presenter describes before posting responses in the discussion forum.

STEPS

1. Organization. Before the first of the two online weeks, the facilitator recruits or invites a member of the group engaged in the Descriptive Consultancy to present a dilemma. With information from the presenter, about a week before the beginning of the two-week long consultancy, the facilitator creates a new discussion forum with the title of the presenters' dilemma (such as "Writer's Block in Adolescent Boys"), a few words to describe it, and directions for the protocol.

2. Presentation. In the meantime, the presenter has pondered the issue and prepared a presentation of the dilemma. *Within two days of the facilitator's creation of the discussion forum, the presenter posts the presentation of the dilemma as a new thread.*

3. Clarifying questions. Participants, in the role of consultants, read through the problem presented and post a response with any clarifying questions they want to address to the presenter. Answers to clarifying questions address gaps in understanding. Consultants title these "Clarifying Questions." *These clarifying questions are due two days after the initial posting, and the presenter should answer them by the end of the first week.*

4. Brainstorming. All consultants post a response to the presenter's dilemma. In their responses, they can write probing questions and/or suggestions for possible solutions or next steps. They title these "Probing Questions" or "Suggestions." *This posting is due in the middle of the second week.*

5. Reactions. The presenter reads the replies to his or her dilemma and posts a reaction to share with everyone. The presenter is encouraged to share any new insights he or she has gained as a result of reading the brainstorming or probing questions and suggestions. This post should be titled "Reaction" as a reply to the original thread. *The posting is due at the end of the second online week.*



6. Debrief. The facilitator creates a new thread called "Insights," and all participants post a reflection on the problem-solving process. They respond to these questions: "How did it feel to do the consultancy online?" and "Would you use this type of protocol in the future for your own work?" *This posting is due at the same time as the "Reaction" posting.*

FACILITATION TIPS

- This protocol tends to run smoothly with few interventions, though monitoring for timeliness and attention to directions is always important.
- If coming together is possible, steps 5 and 6 could be done in person.
- It might be helpful to do the face-to-face version first before trying this online version.