WHERE PRINCIPALS DARE *to* DREAM

CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP NARROWS THE GAP BETWEEN VISION AND REALITY

By Kevin Fahey

Being a principal was the most demanding job I ever had. I worked hard, mostly in isolation. Like most principals, I struggled to manage the position's political and bureaucratic necessities in order to concentrate on what I thought was the fundamental work of schools: teaching and learning. I struggled to continue to learn and grow as a leader to keep alive a dream of schools as collaborative, reflective places that persistently focused on teacher practice and student learning. It was a hard job, and I am proud of the work I did. I lasted three years.

It was only after I left the principalship that I learned that a large body of research confirms that principals work in isolated, often competitive, bureaucratic cultures and that one key to their success is the ability to continue to learn and grow as leaders (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008). Successful principals continue to learn about leading. The dilemma is, given the complexity and pressures of school leadership, what could that continued leadership learning look like?

CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP MODEL

In fall 2004, a group of recent graduates of a district-college educational leadership partnership program built on the concept of learning community to craft one answer to the question of continued leadership learning. The Tri District Initiative in Leadership Education, a partnership between Salem State University in Salem, Mass., and neighboring school districts, was designed as a school leadership degree and licensure program with a clear focus. The program recognized that effective school leadership involves carrying out the technical aspects of a principal's work and that successful leaders create school communities that are reflective, collaborative and, most of all, persistently focused on student, adult, and organizational learning (Fahey, 2011).

Program graduates formed a professional learning community based on a Critical Friends Group model, which they had used as part of their leadership practicum. This model is characterized by two essential elements: regular, intentional use of structured conversations — or protocols — to guide the group's learning and skilled facilitation (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997; School Reform Initiative, 2010). The Critical Friends Group model recognizes that because schools are not always reflective, collaborative places, educators need to be very intentional about creating, managing, and sustaining their own learning. Members of Critical Friends Groups understand that the use of protocols combined with thoughtful facilitation is a powerful support for ongoing, useful professional learning (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007).

Initially, the group used the model as short-term support for program graduates transitioning to formal leadership positions. At the beginning, I facilitated this initial Critical Friends Group as part of the district-university partnership. However, the work has since grown into something more enduring and powerful in which group members take responsibility for facilitation and I, like everyone else in the group, am a learner (Fahey, 2011).

Following the Critical Friends Group model, the group used a defined structure for its 2½-hour monthly meetings. Every meeting began with a check-in, when members of the group set aside time to reflect "… upon a thought, a story, an insight, a question, or a feeling that they are carrying with them into the session, and then connect it to the work they are about to do" (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997).

Next, the group typically used a protocol to discuss and receive feedback on a specific dilemma of leadership practice. The group also used protocols to examine data, read professional texts, and look collaboratively at student work. The Critical Friends Group often scheduled enough time to complete two protocols in a meeting. In addition, at the end of the meeting, the group reflected on the session.

From fall 2004 to spring 2009, the group's 13 members met 44 times and used eight protocols to unpack dilemmas of leadership practice, look at relevant texts, examine student and leadership work, and continue to learn about leading. The structure that the group used most frequently (21 times) was the Consultancy Protocol (School Reform Initiative, 2010).

The Consultancy Protocol is a structured conversation that is divided into six discrete steps:

1. The presenter describes a dilemma and the context in which it is situated. Typically, the presenter ends the presentation with a question for the group to consider.
2. The facilitator guides the group through a series of questions, starting with very specific, clarifying questions. Clarifying questions have very brief, factual answers and are designed to help the group understand the context of the dilemma.
3. The facilitator asks the group for probing questions — questions that ask the presenter to do more analysis or expand his or her thinking about the dilemma. The group does not discuss the presenter's answers.
4. The presenter remains silent while the group discusses the dilemma and the presenter's question. The group might, for example, reflect on what they heard, what they thought the real dilemma might be, or what assumptions might influence the dilemma. Sometimes, a group offers concrete suggestions; other times, the discussion centers more on understanding the true nature of the dilemma.
5. The presenter reflects on what he or she heard and what resonated during the discussion.
6. The facilitator asks the group to reflect on the process (School Reform Initiative, 2010).

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WHAT WE LEARNED

At the April 2009 meeting, group members, reflecting on their five years of work together, suggested that their learning together had taken place at two levels. The first level was around content-specific aspects of their leadership practice. In the five years that they met, the group considered topics such as supervision and evaluation, negotiating boundaries with other administrators, parent surveys, budget crises, literacy in schools, helping struggling teachers, and many others. During the 44 sessions, the principals considered 34 issues of principal practice. Some, such as

the work of building professional community in schools (eight sessions) or having difficult conversations (six sessions), were the focus of multiple meetings.

In considering these issues, group members acknowledged that their Critical Friends Group learning led them to a place, as one participant said, "where you are learning with other principals and don't have to fake it." After a session around a challenging personnel issue, one principal summed up his learning by saying, "Whom do you test your ideas on? I often have no place in my school or district to learn." The Critical Friends Group encouraged members to continue to learn about specific aspects of their practice in a way that was not regularly available to them. Moreover, this learning was directly connected to real-time issues that the school leaders were facing.

The second level of learning connected to more emotional and personal elements of principal practice. One principal described how "wiping bottoms and loading buses could easily become my daily work. There is a gap between my dreams and vision as a principal and the reality of my work." Another admitted, "I am being robbed of my time to spend with kids and focus on learning." Over time, principals spent less time considering the technical issues of their work and more time on concerns such as maintaining balance and "not being off-kilter." One typical comment was, "It is hard to spill it out. But I know all you guys, I know you are here to help me, and so it's easier to do." Over the years that the group met, members more easily articulated and reflected on the affective and personal learning that the principalship requires.

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In the April 2009 meeting, one principal summed up the emotional and personal nature of her learning in the Critical Friends Group by admitting, "This is where I come to check in with my dreams." Others added how the group's work was "a critical reminder about what our real work is," "a way that dreams of good schools are made and sustained," and "a conversation that fuels me, feeds me, that helps me sustain my personal vision and goals." For these school leaders, the Critical Friends Group is a place where principals can look beyond their hectic, fragmented daily practice and continue to learn about and sustain the personal vision of schools that brought them into leadership in the first place.

HOW WE LEARNED

Not only were group members able to reflect on what they were learning, they could also describe how the group supported that learning. For example, many members highlighted how reflective, collaborative conversations were difficult to find. Comments included, "In this job, you can go weeks without this type of conversation," "Now I have a place to come and hash things out," and "The Critical Friends Group almost has a spiritual quality."

Another principal described her experience this way: "The group is honest, truthful. You have to trust in the group. I knew that when I missed Critical Friends Group meetings, I was really missing something. I think it was the honest, truthful conversations, and knowing that you had a voice. I don't always feel I always have these."

Another said, "In our regular administrative meetings, I often say we have to slow it down. That is what we do in the Critical Friends Group. It is slower-paced, it is focused, it is thoughtful, and it is purposeful." Members considered the Critical Friends Group a thoughtful, safe, reflective, and honest place that could create and sustain learning.

Every group member noted that a commitment to intellectual rigor and the use of protocols were essential in creating this reflective, collaborative learning environment. For example, one principal said, "I look at our Critical Friends Group as having rigor. There is always a focus. People bring a problem. We use a protocol. There is a lot of opening up in those sessions. It is more than a support group. We had a support group in a system I used to work in, but I would feel funny about bringing a text to look at or presenting a problem or using a protocol. I could not even suggest it."

Another member said, "I never in my wildest imagination would have ever dreamed that I would have valued protocols in a conversation. But I need that. I need to have a structure if I am going to get value out of something. If I don't, I will just go on and on, and regress into some anecdotal conversation." Another said: "The great thing was that all of our Critical Friends Group sessions had a protocol to guide the conversation. It was great to be able share yourself." The protocols focused the learning and created a sense of rigor.

The members also noted that the use of protocols supported their individual learning. Members' comments included: "This is where you really get it. It seems like we are all invested in this format, in this way of having conversations." "It makes a difference going through the process. It made me see things that I would not have seen in another way. It was helpful to hear." "The Critical Friends Group reminds you that there is more than one way to look at a problem. You really need to stay open and respect other people's perspectives." The protocols opened up everyone in the group to a variety of perspectives on leadership practice.

Perhaps the most compelling piece of data about the effectiveness of this leadership Critical Friends Group is this: Without district support, stipends, professional development points, or graduate credits, these school leaders continue to meet and learn together about leadership. The engine that continues to drive the group is a desire not only to continue to learn — for

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Wineburg, & Woolworth (2001) found that teachers struggle to collaborate deeply to improve teaching practices. The following activities help lay the groundwork.

Listen to how each person describes worthwhile meetings. The chart on p. 41 provides a useful tool for building understanding and setting norms before communication problems arise. Team members use one color to highlight items they want to keep in mind to improve their own collaboration skills. In another color, they highlight items they think might suggest key group norms. The group then discusses the suggestions and comes to agreement. This helps teams go beyond generic norms such as, "We will start on time," to ones that match their particular group's dynamics.

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Focus tasks. Many key professional learning community activities, such as examining student work, can be focused to demonstrate the value of collaboration. For example, I often have teachers begin with a sample set of student work from a common math assessment, asking them to use a rubric to rate student ability to explain their reasoning. Participants quickly realize that by avoiding other topics such as task design, accuracy, or appropriateness, they quickly gain new insights into how to assess student reasoning.

Vision, trust, and collaboration skills are essential if professional learning communities are to go the distance, yet leaders can start collaborative work while laying this equally essential foundation. How will leaders know if it's working? Professional learning community members will view their time together as key to improving student success, which is, after all, the true goal of a professional learning community.

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Jane A.G. Kise (jane@janekise.com) is an educational consultant, specializing in team building, coaching, and differentiated instruction, especially in mathematics. Her latest book, with co-author Beth Russell, is *Creating a Coaching Culture for Professional Learning Communities* (Solution Tree, 2010). ■

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example, about budgets and personnel issues — but also, more importantly, to "check in on their dreams" — to keep alive a vision of teaching, learning, and leadership that transcends the daily routine of a principal's work. So the Critical Friends Group continues to meet and learn together about leading. In fall 2012, we will begin year eight.

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Kevin Fahey (kfahey@salemstate.edu) is associate professor at Salem State University in Salem, Mass., and co-author of *Leadership for Powerful Learning* (Teachers College Press, in press). ■