

Protocols: A Powerful Prescription for Professional Learning

By Thomas W. Many and Susan K. Sparks

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The growing consensus around the importance of high-performing collaborative teams parallels the growing support for the use of protocols. Many principals find the regular use of protocols increases the effectiveness of team meetings. Likewise, many teachers recognize the positive impact protocols have on their practice. Both principals and teachers embrace protocols because ultimately, the effective use of protocols promotes higher levels of professional productivity.

“While protocols vary in significant ways, they all do two things: provide a structure for conversation—a series of steps that a group follows in a fixed order—and specify the roles different people in the group will play.”

—Marjorie Larner

In their simplest form, protocols are a set of agreed-on guidelines for a conversation. A protocol typically describes a specific—almost prescriptive—process that structures the work of teams. The description of a protocol outlines such details as the purpose, expected outcomes, step-by-step directions, number of participants, roles of team members, and time requirements. According to consultant, coach, and author Lois Brown Easton (2009), there are four categories of protocols: (1) looking at student work, (2) looking at professional practice, (3) looking at issues and concerns, and (4) looking at professional reading. All can positively impact the productivity of collaborative teams.

Looking at Student Work

As teams grow more skilled at using protocols, they become better students of their own students. This category of protocols places an appropriate emphasis on *using* data rather than *collecting* data. Teams that use these protocols to examine student work become faster and more accurate in their student-data analysis. Teachers using protocols are far more likely to look at student work collaboratively for the purpose of determining student needs than look at student work in isolation for the purpose of assigning grades.

Looking at Professional Practice

As more educators accept the use of protocols, teachers begin to see the value of protocols as a tool to examine their professional practice. Instead of focusing on individual interests in team meetings, this category of protocols helps members focus their conversations on the complex task of improving teaching and learning. The structure of these protocols engages teachers, keeps them on task, and establishes a precedent for collectively questioning current practice.

Looking at Issues and Concerns

Teams also rely on this protocol category to help solve problems. Often teams get stuck and spend hours naming, renaming, or even nicknaming problems. They identify and overidentify issues, but lack the necessary skills to solve them and end up grinding away at their concerns with little success. This cycle of *find and grind* impacts a team's sense of collective efficacy in

significant ways. Teachers quickly learn these protocols provide teams with new and effective problem-solving tools.

Looking at Professional Reading

Finally, the regular use of these protocols fosters the development of more reflective practitioners. Sharing professional reading promotes a culture where teachers freely share ideas, openly exploring the strengths and weaknesses. Using these protocols to facilitate discussion of articles allows teachers to thoroughly inspect challenging issues and think about the intended and unintended consequences of their actions.

“Without an explicit structure, conversations about teaching and learning tend to drift, go in many directions at once, or become so abstract that they are unlikely to lead to any useful learning.”

—Alexandra Weinbaum and colleagues

The support for using protocols as a way to improve team meetings is compelling, but when principals first introduce the idea, they are often met with resistance. This was certainly the case in Kildeer Countryside School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, where the author (Tom Many) was superintendent. Principals found that a combination of *top-down pressure* (insisting teams use protocols) and *bottom-up support* (providing additional training, effective facilitation, and modeling of protocols during faculty meetings) was necessary to incorporate the regular use of protocols into team meetings.

Initially, some Buffalo Grove teachers felt protocols made conversations slow and superficial; they described their discussions as contrived and unnatural. Other teachers felt requiring teams to use protocols somehow limited their academic freedom or diminished their professional autonomy. In general, there was a belief that using a formal process to engage in structured conversations was nothing more than “process for the sake of process.”

Some of these concerns are valid; using protocols does disrupt the typical communication patterns in traditional team meetings. This is because using protocols does not allow teams to engage in the kind of random, unfocused conversations they are accustomed to having. For some teachers, this shift to a more transparent, focused, and structured meeting format can be uncomfortable and make them feel vulnerable. What everyone in the system must come to understand is that the regular use of protocols promotes development of trust between and among team members. When teachers feel safe, they listen to one another more intensely and, when combined with effective norms, protocols help teams navigate difficult conversations.

Other teachers find protocols challenging because of isolation cultures in their school and the privatization of their professional practice. Early on in Buffalo Grove, it became clear that the regular use of protocols challenged the mindless precedent of past practice. However, protocols confronted the precedent in more productive ways. Instead of getting comfortable with the old, familiar way of doing things, protocols pushed teams to generate new alternatives. What had previously seemed impossible suddenly became possible. Principals and teachers had to acknowledge no single individual had all the answers and with more knowledge and experience at the table, teachers were able to see possibilities and opportunities they may not have seen before.

Promoting dialogue over discussion or debate makes protocols improve communication between and among teachers as well. Rather than allow individuals to be verbally trampled by an overzealous teammate, protocols structure conversations in ways that ensure every voice is heard. Principals find conversations shift in meetings and see when teams use protocols, teachers engage in focused dialogue to promote the sharing of new ideas and strategies. In

contrast, teams that did not incorporate protocols continue to tolerate random discussions that sanction the *hiding and hoarding* of best practice. Protocols encourage exploration and alternative thinking, and by slowing down, teams generate better alternatives.

Principals also see regular use of protocols promotes developing a culture of inquiry which allows teachers, working with others confronting similar problems, to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the settings where they spend their professional lives. These teachers are more likely to seek out honest, growth-oriented feedback to promote high levels of student learning. In contrast, on teams where teachers resist using protocols, relationships tend to favor the kind of polite, superficial feedback that protects adult relationships.

“Protocols are one of the most powerful processes that people in PLCs can use for learning.”

—Lois Brown Easton

The effort to incorporate protocols as tools to improve the effectiveness of team meetings takes time, but it is worth the effort. The change requires patience and persistence, but principals and teachers find the benefits of using protocols far exceed the challenges of implementing them. As Easton (2009) says, protocols are the “ideal vehicle for holding the professional conversations that need to occur in PLCs—conversations that will lead to increased student achievement and motivation” (p. 1).

References

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