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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Susan Sparks

Protocols: A Powerful Prescription for Professional Learning

The growing support for protocols has paralleled the growing consensus around the importance of high performing collaborative teams. Many principals have found the regular use of protocols increases the effectiveness of team meetings. Likewise, many teachers have recognized the positive impact protocols have on their practice. Both principals and teachers have embraced 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-upon 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 Lois Brown Easton, there are four categories of protocols (Looking at Student Work, Looking at Professional Practice, Looking at Issues and Concerns, and Looking at Professional Reading) and 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 group of protocols places an appropriate emphasis on using data rather than collecting data, and teams that use these protocols to examine student work become faster and more accurate in the analysis of student data. Teachers using protocols are far more likely to look at student work collaboratively for the



purpose of determining student needs rather than look at student work in isolation for the purpose of assigning grades.

Looking at Professional Practice

As the use of protocols becomes more accepted, 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 focus conversations on the complex task of improving teaching and learning. The structure provided by these protocols keeps teachers engaged, 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, even nicknaming problems. They identify and over identify 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 that 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 ideas are freely shared and strengths and weaknesses are openly explored. 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” –A. Weinbaum

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 District 96 (Buffalo Grove, Illinois) where principals found that a combination of top down pressure (insisting that 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 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 were true; using protocols did disrupt the communication patterns typically found in traditional team meetings. This is because using protocols does not allow teams to engage in the kind of random, un-focused conversations they were accustomed to having in the past. For some teachers, this shift to a more transparent, focused, and structured meeting format was uncomfortable and made them feel vulnerable. What principals came to understand was that the regular use of protocols promoted development of trust between and amongst team members. When teachers feel safe they listen to each other more deeply and, when combined with effective norms, protocols help teams navigate difficult conversations.

Other teachers found protocols challenging because of school cultures characterized by isolation and the privatization of their professional practice; early on, 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 that 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.

Protocols improved communication between and among teachers as well by promoting dialogue over discussion or debate. Rather than allow individuals to be verbally trampled by an overzealous teammate, protocols structured conversations in ways that ensured every voice was heard. Principals found that conversations shifted in the meetings and saw that when teams used protocols, teachers engaged in focused dialogue designed to promote the sharing of new ideas and strategies. In contrast, teams that did not incorporate protocols continued to tolerate random discussions that sanctioned the hiding and hoarding of best practice. It became clear that protocols encouraged exploration and alternative thinking. By slowing down, teams generated better alternatives.

Principals also saw that the regular use of protocols promoted development of a culture of inquiry which allowed teachers, working with others confronting similar problems, to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the settings where they spent their professional lives. These teachers were more likely to seek out honest, growth oriented feedback to promote high levels of student learning. In contrast, on teams where teachers resisted using protocols, relationships tended to favor the kind of polite, superficial feedback that protects adult relationships.

“Protocols are one of the most powerful processes people can engage in to promote professional learning.” - Lois Brown Easton

The effort to incorporate protocols as a tool to improve the effectiveness of team meetings took time but it was worth the effort. The change required patience and persistence, but principals and teachers found the benefits of using protocols far exceeded the challenges of implementing them. As Lois Brown Easton said, “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.” ■

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Resources

Easton, L. B. (2009). *Protocols for Professional Learning*. ASCD. Alexandria, VA.

Larner, M. (2007). *Tools for Leaders*. Scholastic, Inc. New York, NY.