



## Peeling the Onion Defining a Dilemma Protocol

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*Developed in the field by educators.*

### **Purpose**

To provide a structured way to develop an appreciation for the complexity of a dilemma in order to avoid the inclination to start out by “solving” the problem before it has been fully defined.

### **Time**

Approximately 40 minutes. The times for each step can be adjusted to fit the available amount of time and the number of people in the group.

### **Facilitation Tips**

Most of us are eager to solve dilemmas before we truly understand their depth. This protocol is designed to help us peel away the layers in order to address the deeper issues that lie underneath the surface. If the dilemma were easy to solve, it would not still be a concern to the presenter. The facilitator should keep to the steps and gently remind people when they are giving advice too early.

### **Process**

1. The keeper of the dilemma describes the problem/dilemma and asks a question to help focus the group's responses. (5 minutes)
2. Clarifying questions from group members to the presenter — these must be purely informational (3 minutes)
3. A series of rounds begins in which each participant speaks to the same prompt. During the rounds the presenter remains silent and takes notes. Facilitator may choose to repeat a round if new responses seem to be emerging.

### **Prompts (in order)**

- “What I heard [the presenters] say is ...”
  - “One assumption that seems to be part of the dilemma is...,” or, “One thing I assume to be true about this problem is ... ”
  - “A question this raises for me is...” (See Pocket Guide to Probing Questions)
  - “Further questions this raises for me are...” (If needed)
  - “What if...?” Or, “Have we thought about...?” Or, “I wonder...?”
4. Presenter reviews her/his notes and reflects aloud on what she/he is learning. (The group members are silent and take notes.)
  5. *If the presenter desires, then engage in this step: Now What?* Together, the presenter and participants talk about the possibilities and options that have surfaced.
  6. Debrief the process. How was this like peeling an onion? What about the process was useful? Frustrating? Interesting?



## A Rationale for Protocols

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*Developed by the Southern Maine Partnership*

The word “protocol” has taken on a more specific meaning in education in recent years. **In the context of educators working to improve their practice, a protocol is a structured process or set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication and learning.** Gene Thompson-Grove writes, “[protocols] permit a certain kind of conversation to occur — often a kind of conversation which people are not in the habit of having. Protocols are vehicles for building the skills — and culture — necessary for collaborative work. Thus, using protocols often allows groups to build trust by actually doing substantive work together.”

Many protocols involve one or a small group of presenting educators and another small group of “consulting” educators. The Tuning Protocol was one of the first, and that term is sometimes used as a generic term for many similar protocols. Protocols are sometimes modified by their users, but it is highly recommended that users try them exactly as they are written several times before making modifications. Please feel free to contact SMP staff if you have questions about protocols.

### **Why should we use a process for communication that feels so artificial, awkward and restrictive?**

This is probably the most frequently asked question about protocols. There are two “rules” in many protocols that seem to cause the most discomfort; they are worth regularly acknowledging before using these protocols with educators:

1. In many protocols there are restrictions on when the presenting educator(s) can talk and when the consulting educators can talk; almost everyone feels awkward at first when told they “can’t talk now.”
2. In many protocols there is a segment during which the consulting educators talk among each other, purposely leaving the presenter(s) out of the conversation — in the third person — almost as though they were not present!

### **Benefits**

However, both of these restrictions have benefits, as described below. The bottom line is that using protocols almost always increases learning, even for those who generally don’t like the structure, by:

- giving the consulting educators time to listen carefully to the entire presentation without needing to quickly generate questions or comments;
- giving the presenting educator(s) time to simply listen and write (during feedback time) without needing to think about providing eye contact or immediately responding to consulting educators;
- having time limits that make it less likely that a small number of individuals will dominate the air time; and
- providing guidelines that safeguard the vulnerability of presenters who put some of their weaknesses “on the table”; these guidelines make it safe to ask challenging questions of each other.

Of course, guidelines alone are not enough to safeguard vulnerability. Participants still need to be considerate in how they speak. “Cool” or “hard” feedback may be evaluative in nature, but it can be heard much better if it’s expressed in the form of a question or with some qualification and a measure of humility, e.g. “I wonder if...”, rather than “I think you should...” Doing this implicitly acknowledges that the consulting educator doesn’t know the context of the situation well enough to tell the presenting educator what they should do. Passionate discussion is wonderful as long as the tone is collegial; self-monitoring of tone of voice and body language is important to maximize learning. We don’t want to shut people down when we’re trying to support them opening up.

As with all protocols, the facilitator should move the group to the next section of the protocol before the allotted time is up if the group seems ready. In addition, the group can give more time to a section before the protocol begins, and the group may want to give the facilitator some flexibility to add a small amount of time to a section during the protocol.

**Remember, the point of a protocol is to have an in-depth, insightful conversation about teaching and learning, not to do a perfect protocol.**



## Considerations for Responsive Facilitation

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*Developed by Marylyn Wentworth.*

Facilitation is a crucial part of any kind of collaborative work. A responsive facilitator has to keep many things in mind as she/he supports the work of a collaborative group. The following list is intended as both a general reminder of important skills, and a checklist of areas one might want to focus on for personal growth.

**A responsive facilitator has to:**

1. Pay attention to group dynamics all the time — body language, who's speaking and who's not, voice tone, reactions between group members, secondary agendas, and judgmental comments;
2. Pay attention to inclusion of all members;
3. Attend to agreed-upon group norms, adding new norms as needed for productive group work;
4. Be able to help a group figure out what it needs, or
5. Figure out what a group needs if it can't — give guidance, and then...
6. Be able to change the agenda to meet the group needs, without losing sight of the purpose/goals of the activity, workshop, or work session;
7. Be able to distinguish between one's own agenda and the agenda of the group;
8. Have a way to identify oneself in the role of facilitator, teacher, and person, when the roles change, and let the group you are facilitating know (One facilitator friend actually has 3 hats and puts them on when his role changes);
9. Know when you are stumped and get help from a colleague or ask the group where to go now — transparent facilitation often works well. It is important not to appear to be an expert when stuck;
10. Recognize when the whole group, sometimes the facilitator too, is "stuck" and put the issue/ dilemma, in the "parking lot" for later when there's been time for reflection and distance, and move on;
11. Be able to step back — get some distance — when you feel yourself being emotionally drawn into difficult group dynamics;
12. Own up to goofs and misperceptions — they are usually great opportunities for learning, and you provide modeling;

13. Resist taking things personally. Groups or individuals sometimes vent their frustration, anger, fears, on the facilitators. That can actually be a sign of dissonance and means progress and change — usually. Take several deep breaths;
14. Work for balance between process and content, but give precedence to process over content when you have to choose. Safe, bonded communities of learners have a higher learning curve;
15. Celebrate when groups move from pseudo-community to the beginnings of real community in a longer workshop. Little of substance can happen in pseudo-community when everyone is being “nice.” This change often occurs on the third day people are together for some reason. The passage is often stormy, comes at unexpected moments over surprising issues, and sometimes involves tears, anger, fear, guilt, and any other emotion. Facilitating a group through this passage can be tricky work. It is here that a facilitator has to distinguish between the growth of a community through the intended goals and purpose — and therapy. Facilitators are not therapists and it is vital not to cross that line, however fuzzy it seems at times;
16. Keep a sense of humor!!! Everyone is human and can make any number of amazing mistakes as well as bring memorable insight and wisdom. Laughing together is a gift and helps keep perspective.