



## Critical Friends Protocol

*Adapted by SF-CESS from Consultancy Protocol by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans & Faith Dunne (1990); For the original Consultancy protocol visit <http://schoolreforminitiative.org>*

- Purpose:** A Critical Friends Protocol is a structured process for helping an individual or team think more expansively about their APT Equity Dilemma.
- Time:** Approximately 50 minutes
- Roles:** Presenter (whose work is being discussed by the group)  
Facilitator (who sometimes participates, depending on the size of the group)

### Steps

1. The presenter gives an **overview** of the APT Equity Dilemma with which s/he is struggling, and frames a question for the Equity-Based Critical Friends Group (EB CFG) to consider. The framing of this question, as well as the quality of the presenter's reflection on the APT Equity Dilemma being discussed, are key features of this protocol. If the presenter has brought student work, educator work, or other "artifacts," there is a pause here to silently examine the work/documents. The focus of the group's conversation is on the APT Equity Dilemma. (~5-10 minutes)
2. The group asks **clarifying** questions of the presenter - questions that have brief, factual answers. (~5 minutes)
3. The group asks **Discourse II probing** questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded so that they help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about the dilemma presented to the CFG. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question s/he framed or to do some analysis of the APT Equity Dilemma presented. The presenter may respond to the group's questions, but there is no discussion by the group of the presenter's responses. At the end of the ten minutes, the facilitator asks the presenter to re-state his/her question for the group. (~10 minutes)
4. The group talks with each other about the APT Equity Dilemma presented. (~15 minutes)  
Possible questions to frame the discussion:
  - What did we hear?
  - What didn't we hear that they think might be relevant?
  - What assumptions seem to be operating?
  - What questions does the APT Equity Dilemma raise for us?
  - What do we think about the APT Equity Dilemma?
  - What might we do or try if faced with a similar APT Equity dilemma?
  - What have we done in similar situations?Members of the group sometimes suggest actions the presenter might consider taking. Most often, however, they work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. The presenter doesn't speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes.
5. The presenter reflects on what s/he heard and on what s/he is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that particularly resonated for him or her during any part of the Critical Friends Protocol. (~5 minutes)
6. The facilitator leads a brief conversation about the group's observation of the Critical Friends process. (~5 minutes)



## Overview

A Critical Friends Protocol is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about an Authentic, Passionate and Transformative (APT) Equity Dilemma. Outside perspective is critical to this protocol working effectively; therefore, some of the participants in the group must be people who do not share the presenter's specific APT Equity Dilemma at that time. When putting together a Critical Friends Group, be sure to include people with differing perspectives.

## APT Equity Dilemmas and Framing Questions

APT Equity Dilemmas...

- Are **Authentic** – you should not already have a solution in mind.
- Are you **Passionate** - they keep you up at night.
- Are **Transformative** - you must be willing to interrupt and change your own practice to address it.

*Sometimes they include samples of student or adult work to illustrate the dilemma, but often they are dilemmas that cross over many parts of the educational process. APT Equity Dilemmas ALWAYS connect to an explicit inequity the presenter wishes to interrupt.*

## Some Generic Examples of APT Equity Dilemmas

Our diverse school consistently says it prioritizes equity. When we discuss our consistent, racial achievement gap, we blame the students and their families.

*Framing Question: What can I, as a new Latina, female teacher, do to interrupt adult-centered discussions and focus on equitable student results?*

I love doing projects with my students – and value their input. While my most successful students love the projects, I consistently hear from my lowest performing students that the projects are boring and irrelevant.

*Framing Question: As an experienced, Asian-American teacher who has tried many strategies over the years, how can I best support my least reached students while still serving my high performing students?*

As part of our WASC accreditation, we are revisiting our mission and vision. This work is being led by a homogenous group of staff who traditionally don't take leadership; the work does not reflect our diverse family population.

*Framing Question: As a leader who is represented by the demographics of this work group, what do I need to do to ensure authentic engagement of all constituents while reinforcing new and shared leadership with my staff?*

I pride myself in forging strong relationships with my students across racial difference. Yet, even with strong relationships, my African American female students continue to perform significantly lower than any of their counterparts in my class. This makes me very anxious about my work.

*Framing Question: What do, as a gay, white man, I need to know and do differently to ensure my African American female students excel as mathematicians?*

*For additional support, see "Unpacking Your D2 APT Dilemma."*

## Preparing to Present a Dilemma in a Critical Friends Protocol

Come to the session with a description of a dilemma related to your practice. Write your dilemma with as much contextual description as you feel you need for understanding. One page is generally sufficient; even half a page can be enough. If you prefer not to write it out, you can make notes and do an oral presentation, but please do some preparation ahead of time.



End your description with a specific question. Frame your question thoughtfully. What do you REALLY want to know? What is your real dilemma? This question will help your consultancy group focus its feedback. Questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” generally provide less feedback for the person with the dilemma, so avoid those kinds of questions. (See the previous pages for a process for framing Critical Friends dilemmas and questions.)

Dilemmas deal with issues with which you are struggling—something that is problematic or has not been as effective as you would like it to be—anything related to your work. Consultancies give presenters an opportunity to tap the expertise in a group, and if past experiences offer any indication, you will be able to rely on the people in your consultancy group to provide respectful, thoughtful, experienced-based responses to your dilemma.

A couple of caveats—we have found that Consultancies don’t go well when people bring dilemmas that they are well on the way to figuring out themselves, or when they bring a dilemma that involves only getting other people to change. To get the most out of this experience, bring something that is still puzzling you about your practice. It is riskier to do, but we guarantee that you will learn more.

### Some Tips

**Step 1:** The success of the Critical Friends Protocol often depends on the quality of the presenter’s reflection in Step 1 as well as on the quality and authenticity of the question framed for the consultancy group. However, it is not uncommon for the presenter, at the end of a Critical Friends Protocol, to say, “Now I know what my real question is.” That is fine, too. It is sometimes helpful for the presenter to prepare ahead of time a brief (one-two page) written description of the dilemma and the issues related to it for the consultancy group to read as part of Step 1.

**Step 2:** Clarifying questions are for the person asking them. They ask the presenter “who, what, where, when, and how.” These are not “why” questions. They can be answered quickly and succinctly, often with a phrase or two.

**Step 3:** Probing questions are for the person answering them. They ask the presenter “why” (among other things), and are open-ended. They take longer to answer, and often require deep thought on the part of the presenter before s/he speaks.

**Step 4:** When the group talks while the presenter listens, it is helpful for the presenter to pull his/her chair back slightly away from the group. This protocol asks the consultancy group to talk about the presenter in the third person, almost as if s/he is not there. As awkward as this may feel at first, it often opens up a rich conversation, and it gives the presenter an opportunity to listen and take notes, without having to respond to the group in any way. Remember that it is the group’s job to offer an analysis of the dilemma or question presented. It is not necessary to solve the dilemma or to offer a definitive answer.

It is important for the presenter to listen in a non-defensive manner. Listen for new ideas, perspectives, and approaches. Listen to the group’s analysis of your question/issues. Listen for assumptions—both your own and the group’s—implicit in the conversation. Don’t listen for judgment of you by the group. This is not supposed to be about you, but about a question you have raised. Remember that you asked the group to help you with this dilemma.

**Step 5:** The point of this time period is not for the presenter to give a “blow by blow” response to the group’s conversation, nor is it to defend or further explain. Rather, this is a time for the presenter to talk about what were, for him/her, the most significant comments, ideas and questions s/he heard. The presenter can also share any new thoughts or questions s/he had while listening to the consultancy group.

**Step 6:** Debriefing the process is key. Don’t short-change this step.