LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

TURN REFLECTION INTO A PUBLIC DIALOGUE ON PRACTICE

BY DIANE P. ZIMMERMAN AND WILLIAM A. SOMMERS

Education experts generally agree that reflection on practice is essential for improving teaching. Yet, in our experience, professional learning communities (PLCs) spend little time engaged in reflective practices. In light of the increasing demands on educators for excellence and accountability, reflective practice conversations ought to be front and center in PLC work — that is, reflective practice needs to become public.

To put it simply, public reflective practice is a check-in: How are we doing, what are we learning from practice, what changes are making a difference, and so on. Teachers have these kinds of conversations privately but rarely have a chance to think out loud with others about what they are coming to understand about teaching and learning. That is a missed opportunity.

One reason that reflective practices are not made public is that this type of conversation requires a specialized skill set that educators do not always possess. Unlike discussions, which comprise the discourse of most meetings, reflective conversations are a form of dialogue.

Discussions tend to go one of two equally unproductive ways: Participants

talk about how they agree and reinforce each other, or they discuss how they don't agree and either argue or go separate ways. It sometimes becomes a win-lose proposition.

In contrast, a reflective conversation is characterized by the discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, in which participants seek to understand and learn from each other. It is not debate, not argument, and often not even agreement.

Dialogue requires that the conversation slow down and that participants take turns reflecting on what they are coming to understand. When participants take time to think, summarize, and inquire of each other, they learn how others are thinking and acting.

This knowledge becomes cumulative and begins to coalesce into a collective knowledge base. When teachers can collectively describe how they make a difference for learning, they demonstrate collective teacher efficacy and pass on learning legacies to their students and the next generation of teachers.

For this reason, we believe that the essential work of PLCs is learning how to enter into a reflective conversation. To help guide PLCs in this work, we have reviewed existing conversation frameworks and outlined how some of them can help educators collaborate and build knowledge.

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FRAMEWORKS FOR REFLECTION

Over our 40-year careers, we have used many frameworks to create and extend reflective conversations. For our book, *Nine Professional Conversations to Change our Schools: A Dashboard of Options* (Sommers & Zimmerman, 2018), we drew from both business and education thought leaders to describe nine frameworks that have been particularly helpful to us.

While we write about each of these frameworks individually, in our work we have found that once a basic framework is understood, the elements can be mixed and matched to meet team learning needs.

To organize our thinking, we placed each of the conversation frameworks on a continuum, starting with the most open-ended and progressing toward the most directive. This continuum has proven useful for leaders and team members in thinking about how best to work together to plan for PLC meetings that focus on reflective practice. The figure on p. 46 will help familiarize you with the terms, which are described here.

Reflective conversations

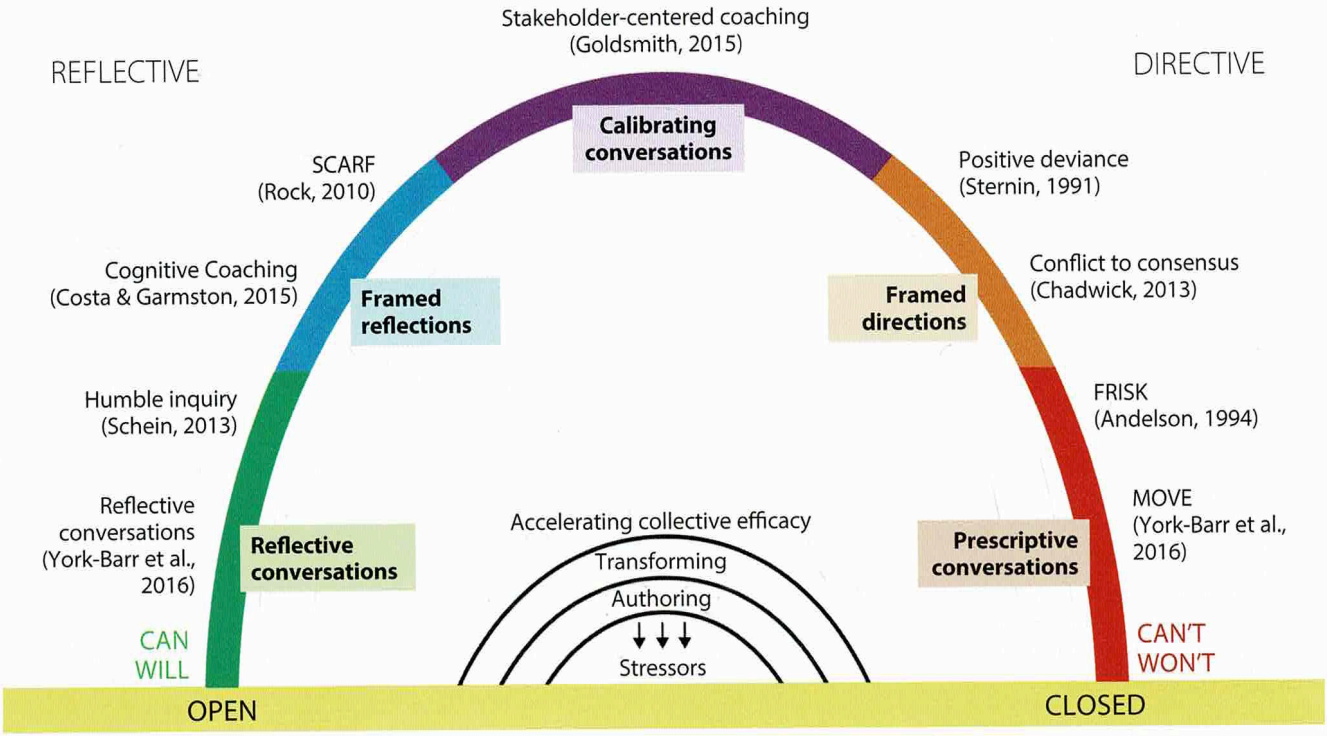
The first two frameworks on the continuum describe reflective conversations in the purest form. Reflective conversations and humble inquiry both use open-ended questions to invite the coachee to talk, explore, examine, and reflect on a professional dilemma.

Edgar Schein, the developer of humble inquiry, found that if he let a person answer the question, "What is going on, and what is the appropriate thing to do?," the client inevitably solved the problem. Over the course of his career, Schein came to understand that what his clients needed was a reflective coach, not a directive consultant.

Framed reflections

These conversations have a bit more structure in that the cognitive coach focuses the inquiry on goals and the resolution of those goals. In the conversation framework, called SCARF, the coach inquires to clarify which of five personal motivations (SCARF is the acronym for these motivations) are driving decision-making. This framework is particularly useful if the

NINE PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS TO CHANGE OUR SCHOOLS



coachee has an emotional overtone to the reflection.

Calibrating conversations

At the top of the arc is stakeholder-centered coaching, developed by Marshall Goldsmith. This type of conversation focuses on data that have been collected from peers, supervisors, and constituents. This data set now frames the conversation. Once the data are understood, the coach then reflects with the coachee about how the data can be used to inform actions.

One of the valuable elements of stakeholder data is that the coachee really cannot argue with the data because they know it represents others' perceptions. But the coachee must be willing to reflect on his or her own behavior related to the data. As coaches, we could provide the data, discuss what they might mean, and even give suggestions, but ultimately the coaching will not be effective if the coachee is not on board.

Indeed, Goldsmith terminates the coaching relationship if the coachee does not appear to want to work with the data. The key is that even though the conversation has a "directive" quality, ultimately the conversation must become about reflection.

Framed directions

The next set of conversations depends on external data that are collected and then used for reflection either with individuals or a group. In these conversations, stakeholders face brutal facts (e.g. many students are failing math) and then look for and learn from pockets of success (e.g. teachers whose students are not failing).

For example, positive deviance outlines a data collection process that looks for outliers — teachers and students who manage to defy the odds — and examines their practices that could be extrapolated to other classrooms.

Conflict to consensus provides a framework for dealing with conflicts. William Sommers successfully resolved a high-drama conflict between a parent and hockey coaches using this framework.

After getting the issues on the table, Sommers asked both sides to list their worst possible outcomes. This brought out the first agreement, from both sides, that resignation of the coach would be the worst possible outcome. The group took a break.

On return, Sommers asked each side to list the best possible outcomes. Through this process, both sides agreed to work on effective communication among the coach, the parents, and the players. The end result was that the coach finally understood what had made the parents so angry, and the parents committed to supporting the coach's decisions.

Prescriptive conversations

Finally, the last two conversation types in our continuum are, at their core, prescriptive. Here, the coach describes the problem and prescribes changes. Some educators think this approach is only for administrators, but we have taught it to teacher leaders as a way to deal with dysfunctional

CONVERSATION FRAMEWORKS		
Framework	**Purpose**	**Initiating questions**
REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS		
Reflective conversations (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2016)	Open-ended reflection on professional practice.	What are you thinking about ...?
Humble inquiry (Schein, 2013)	Open-ended reflection on a professional problem.	What is going on ...?
FRAMED REFLECTIONS		
Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2015)	Focus on goal setting, the collection of evidence, and reflection on the learning.	What are you planning? How will you know if it is going as planned? How did it go?
SCARF Status, certainty, autonomy, relationship, fairness (Rock, 2010)	Focus on team motivations for reward or threat.	What is motivating our behaviors?
CALIBRATING CONVERSATIONS		
Stakeholder-centered coaching (Goldsmith, 2015)	Reflect and act on feedback given by stakeholders	What can you learn from the feedback that would inform your work?
FRAMED DIRECTIONS		
Positive deviance (Sternin, 1991)	Find success, study it, and reflect on ways it can be replicated.	What can we learn from others' successes?
Conflict to consensus (Chadwick, 2013)	Parse out conflict by reflecting on worst and best cases.	What is the worst-case scenario? What is the best-case scenario? What can we learn from these?
PRESCRIPTIVE CONVERSATIONS		
FRISK Facts, rules, impact, suggestions, knowledge (Andelson, 1994)	Establish and communicate clear criteria for change.	How can you meet these expectations?
MOVE Move, outplacement, voluntary change, exit (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2016)	Create an exit strategy.	What other options do we have before termination?

group behaviors. The key, once again, is that once the data are articulated, then the reflection needs to shift toward how changes can be made either by individuals or a group.

The FRISK (also an acronym for the steps that lead to direct feedback) process can be an effective way to get groups to reflect deeply about a hot issue. Diane Zimmerman used a variation of FRISK to guide a group of teachers into a deep reflection about how appreciations are both given and accepted.

Her initial set-up had followed a simple FRISK formula: (Fact) "The superintendent wants me to nominate a teacher of the year from this school, and several of you have told me this school doesn't do this. (Rule) The superintendent seems to think I need to ignore past practice (Impact), and this makes me uncomfortable. (Suggestion) I need to figure out what led to this decision (Knowledge) and what we might want to do collectively."

The ensuing dialogue ended up shifting the culture of the school by encouraging authentic appreciations. It turns out the teachers had no problem with recognition if it was deserved but believed that some who had received the award in the past had not been

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