

## A Novice

I am just beginning to understand the role good, effective facilitation has in helping people to look at issues closely within a community. Landmark High School is a model for a kind of school- a school that is deeply rooted in personalization and community. This is evident in the daily interactions I have with staff and students as well as among the interactions I observe between teachers and students. The curriculum planning team structure and the institute/house structure while still in need of some tweaking is further evidence that we are a school interested in collaboration and democratic decision making. The adults come to work each day ready to participate in the life of the school outside of their classrooms. The ownership among the adults is a strength of the school and speaks to a leadership style that exists within Landmark. Even within this tightly woven community however, I understand that problem solving together can be messy and unproductive if not thought through very closely (and outside the head of one single person)...this is where the role of both facilitator and her understandings of the power and validity of protocols has big implications for affecting school reform from within a school community.

As I continue to learn more about the role of facilitative leadership I appreciate that my past eleven years at Landmark does make a difference in my ability to be a facilitative leader in terms of the history I understand and how we arrived at present structures and routines that are in place in the school- an important context for growth. As I think more about moving the school forward and making us a stronger and more effective school, I continually keep my eyes open to the strengths of the school as well as the things we need to improve upon together. Sharing my vision and being transparent with the staff in terms of where I would like to see the school be 2-3 years from now (with regards to instruction and assessment) has opened up opportunities and new ways for the staff to think together about the work we need to do. (artifact 1/meeting minutes) The implementation and evolution of how we use protocols to develop good habits and who facilitates the work will be a large piece of how I see my role in the change process. It is my responsibility to model good facilitative leadership if that is what I expect from curriculum/team leaders. *At its heart, facilitating is about promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust.*

I believe that in my role as a leader reflection is essential. (artifact 2/winter 2004 reflection) I have chosen to create this portfolio out of a strong need I had to continually reflect on my leadership role this past year. It is very difficult as a principal to step away from the intensity of the work and because of this I have pushed myself to write hoping that this process will help me to learn and get better at what I have started. I am only at the beginning of my journey and I have questions, lots of questions. My participation in the facilitator's institute was a positive experience for me as the work was both an individual learning experience as well as a collective experience for my team of teachers. I like learning with others especially when the work can be shared and brought back to the school.

I always admired leaders who were inclusive and not exclusive. I appreciated leaders who were transparent about their work. I admire others who have the ability to facilitate a group-and allow at times the group to experience themselves as powerful members of the group while not allowing them to take over an agenda, this can be done effectively when a group establishes healthy norms together. (artifact 3/staff resolutions and norms) I have experienced meetings where the facilitator was able to balance an agenda with the needs of individuals in a group. She knew the group and the individuals within the group and was therefore able to give time and space within an agenda for raising questions from individuals as well as opportunities for feedback. The feedback was incorporated into future agendas and members of the group witnessed an example of how appropriate structures built into a group process strengthened the groups ability to work effectively together.

I was recently asked why I became a principal and if I enjoy my work. The answer to the first question is simple; I helped create a school and when opportunity presented itself to take on a formal leadership role while it was not a seamless transition for me it felt right....I do remember going home and having a good cry that evening because I began to doubt and question my abilities as a leader. While there have been moments where I have questioned what I am supposed to do and have felt alone facing specific dilemmas, these have been fleeting times. If one is reflective and serious about their work and their role in the group then this will happen on occasion. I accept that for a reflective leader this happens often. I enjoy my work. I love working with smart, talented teachers who dedicate themselves to their students. I love being the principal of a school that struggles with tough issues and consciously tries to not tackle them all; this I know is completely counterproductive, less is more. I appreciate what we have built and embrace the challenges...simultaneously trusting that within our reach are different solutions to the challenges.

In order for students to be empowered learners, teachers need to be empowered in terms of their abilities to make changes/improvements across the school. Without the time and work put into thinking through processes for arriving in such a place, real change is limited. I believe that good leadership centers around process and the more I read and reflect the more sure I am that how we build and create forums within our school to dialog with one another, visit classrooms, and allow teachers time to visit other schools the better we will be at addressing issues as a school. The spirit of protocols helps to build a kind of spirit among a reflective community of learners. *A well designed protocol is more than the sum of its steps. Protocols not only have specific and identifiable features and goals, but they also have a certain "feel" or create a certain atmosphere in which a group works together. Often, the spirit of a protocol is generated by the ways in which the various steps work together to maintain a creative tension among several important qualities.* At a recent faculty meeting the decision to use the *Futures Protocol* was reached after a lengthy discussion I had with Alan Dichter. What became clear to me in our first conversation was that my goal and the outcome I desired needed to be clearly articulated so that the use of a protocol fit the outcome. (artifact 4/Future Protocol) Each time I participated in using a new protocol this past year I spent time

thinking about my goal with the group. Once I was able to articulate the goal, then I was able to fine tune a protocol to fit the situation. Each time it was helpful to have a colleague who was experienced in using protocols to talk it through with me.

### **Surfacing and Managing Controversy and Paradox; Valuing Dissidence**

Michael Fullan writes in Leading in a Culture of Change about leadership, “Leadership, then, is not mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve, but to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed.” This resonated for me as I began to think and talk to colleagues about the role of performance based assessment at Landmark. Portfolios were designed at a time when we as a school were given a variance from New York State to use alternative assessment in order to graduate our students. As a result of the climate with which our portfolio model was birthed we created a particular model. Over time I have come to see the continued benefit portfolios can offer students but also have seen ways we need to strengthen and redefine their purpose at Landmark. I was not sure where opening the discussion with the faculty would go but I was sure it was the right time to raise the issue.

I am fortunate to work with a group of teachers who are advocates for the school and for their students. Over the past few years as many of the first generation of teachers left Landmark we did not do enough work in terms of telling the stories. As a result new teachers have no sense of how we came to be a school that looks like we do. As I look back to last year and the issues that were shared and raised among teachers regarding our portfolio process I listened, I reflected on their concerns, I spoke to colleagues about some of our dilemmas and I was not sure where to turn....This school year however I felt in a different space regarding my leadership capacity. I accepted that I did not have to have all the answers in order to proceed. Facilitative leadership has taught me that I do not have to have all the answers; that is not what my work is about. I have to be smart about focusing our attention, creating structures and safe spaces to have conversations inside the school about our work...we have begun the conversation.

The role of the Portfolio Exploratory Committee (PEC) is to serve as a think tank and a long term planning committee for the school. We are responsible for learning more about portfolios and then sharing in structured forums what we learn. The committee was formed out of a need to address a dilemma in the school and teachers across institutes volunteered to lead the work and a teacher, really wanted to facilitate the first meeting and spent time thinking about the agenda and ways to help ensure at the meeting that all voices were heard. At the first meeting (I was not present) what became quickly evident was that the original issue was simply a manifestation of broader issues and the focus was lost as good questions were raised. (artifact 5/meeting minutes) There was also some confusion and need to clarify my role within the committee. This was a learning moment for me as I again understood the need for transparency in terms of my own leadership role in the school. I was happy that this teacher wanted to facilitate the first meeting but group members were still too unsure what the purpose of the group was and therefore they raised thoughtful and important questions regarding the groups’ purpose and their

authority in terms of decision making on behalf of the school. It also demonstrated to me that the teacher might not have been as ready as she initially thought to facilitate the group and members sensed her own ambivalence in this role.

This example required me to step back and think again about my role as leader of the school. It also made me think harder about the role of the group and the responsibilities of the staff. In my desire to help create other entry points for leadership in the school I might have too quickly assumed that this group was ready to take on this role without my presence, and my absence from the group led to counter productive discomfort for both the facilitator as well as group members. This raises an important question for me as I move ahead trying to create a school culture that is infused with teacher leadership: How do you promote leaders knowing that they are not “ready” while at the same time finding ways to support them? How do I create opportunities for teachers to be trained in group facilitation? I know when I began taking on different leadership roles for the first time that I was not always ready but made sure that there was an opportunity to receive feedback. These initial experiences helped me to better understand my role and the challenges of the work. This is for me a paradox, encouraging people to take on leadership roles for which they cannot be ready-having had no experience in the role. It challenges me to balance the work and responsibilities across the leadership structure within our school community.

As the staff works together to redefine and reimagine our portfolio process, questions have come up for me as a facilitative leader: How do you help a staff do this work? How do you make it productive and engaging? Why is it important for staffs to think about change together? How do I scaffold the work? Who must I involve? What can I offer the group? What can I learn from the group? How do I help the group learn from one another? These questions help guide me in using the standard of creating authentic public learning for equitable outcomes. Our faculty meetings this semester have used a variety of formats and structures that maximize participation of the faculty. (artifact 6/faculty meeting agenda)

I believe in the usefulness of feedback in working with groups of people. Feedback has helped me to sort out differing points of view and allowed me to better read the group. The staff listens closely when feedback is given and I make it a point to carefully select themes raised by staff members. I have appreciated how this allows me to I put out a controversial idea raised by a teacher. It is always good to share positive feedback related to the process used at the prior meeting. Faculty has found the use of protocols raise the level of productivity at meetings. Openly sharing the feedback is also useful since it allows everyone the opportunity to hear what others may be thinking in the group. When you have a staff (composed of many North/West types) the feedback helps them understand that not everyone thinks alike and not everyone is on the same page. In the early stages of our work to redefine Portfolios at Landmark the feedback allows me to take the group’s pulse and helps me to tweak agendas. I have found that sharing that feedback helps the group understand and give me constructive feedback on these decisions. It is clearer to me now that transparency is essential to create healthy, long

term reforms in a school and feedback helps keep the process open to all participants.  
(artifact 7/feedback examples)

### **Building Democratic Community with Voice and Respect**

There exist within a small high school community such as Landmark, different challenges around both the creation and need to support teacher leadership. When the school first opened and we were a small group of 9 adults we often sat around a table together and made decisions collectively...we might have argued and disagreed but in the end we would come together and move ahead. Sylvia, the founding principal of the school was someone who believed in creating forums for voices to be heard and this norm is one that continues to this day in the school in a variety of ways. What was not clearly established however was the notion that teacher leadership should not be based on a culture of volunteerism. Over the years when the need for a teacher leader emerged to either help facilitate curriculum meetings or team meetings, folks would often begrudgingly take it on because nobody else wanted to...this did not make for constructive teacher empowerment nor did it allow for constructive feedback- we were all too thankful. Having observed this pattern over time, I sought to strengthen the model this past school year.

I spent time thinking about school goals for the year and the need to better organize professional development within the school. As a result I decided that there were teachers who had demonstrated leadership overtime in the school and were respected by their peers for their work with students. I spoke with each person about assuming the role of curriculum leader and explained to them why I thought they were right for the work. I also asked them what support they needed in order to be effective as leaders (something that was never asked in the early years) and each person agreed to think about the new role and later on agreed to try on a new leadership with support from me as well as their peers. I set in motion the idea that we would have public expectations for leaders as well as group members, a new idea for a school entering its second decade.

A challenge for me in my second year as principal, was to come before the faculty and explain my thinking behind choosing leaders this year as I sought to focus on transparency behind making all decisions. I remember feeling anxious, thinking that someone might accuse me of not being democratic, but as I explained the rationale, and why I felt it was important for me to be active in making a choice/decision, I felt just the opposite from the room. I was descriptive about their roles and responsibilities as curriculum leaders and followed this up with these questions: "What are the responsibilities of group members within a group? What norms should be created in order to help the leader help support the group? What might the group members need from the leader?" This is something that had never been done before and while I think now that this needs to happen periodically over time, it was an important first step in being transparent about a process that was being put in place in order to help teachers work together. When a leader spends time up front publicly creating norms with a group, the members become empowered and have an understanding of their

responsibilities within the community. When habits such as reflection are clearly valued within a group, and active listening is valued as much as active questioning then an organization, in this instance our school, is on the path to developing a strong democratic community.

As a leader it can be important to make decisions and choices on behalf of the group. However, if the leader does not model many of the positive behaviors needed for groups to work effectively, it can potentially cause others to question or begin to not trust a leader in a collaborative decision making school. I have learned that if I am transparent about decisions and share my thinking out loud people then have an opportunity to constructively question and raise issues. Additionally, if my decisions incorporate public feedback and I strive to synthesize our thinking it is tough not be credible. Once a process has been made public and the group at large has witnessed it, then I think you have a healthy platform to always return when issues arise.

### **Learning from a Mistake and/or Developing my Tool Box**

This past fall I decided to help my Local Instructional Superintendent, Alan Dichter initiate the principal inter-visitations for our cohort of principals. I like when educators visit the school, especially if they are coming to help me look at a particular issue of concern to me. I raised a question for the group to consider when they visited classrooms—is there evidence of active student engagement in classrooms? What does engagement look like? I was open to my new colleagues coming for a visit but from the start of the morning I became acutely aware that my colleagues were not used to doing this work together and as a result the visit became a teachable moment for me. We had agreed to use a Visit Protocol (artifact 8) though people had a difficult time following it since it was the early on in our groups' protocol experience and I was responsible for both hosting and facilitating the group...this I was aware very early on that morning was going to prove to not be effective and quickly tried to turn over the facilitation to a principal intern who did as good a job as anyone. He tried to get everyone to focus on my question and keep opinions and suggestions out of the discussion. This was an example of what can happen when a group has not established norms and the facilitator is unable to provide the group members the proper protocol structure.

I remember being aware of the group and each participants lack of ownership and understanding of the process. (artifact 9) I remember being angry at myself for thinking I could play both roles (host and facilitator)...what was I thinking? I remember feeling abandoned by Alan who thought the group could do the work...and who afterwards, immediately wanted to model a second visit with a smaller group. The intention of the second visit was twofold: to model evidence of descriptive feedback for the initial group and to allow the Landmark teachers an opportunity to receive feedback as well. I was open with the teachers regarding each group of visitors so they were aware of the process. as well. At the next principal's cohort meeting that month Alan used transcripts from each visit so that the group had a better sense of how the process was supposed to work. The openness of the mistake allowed the group to reflect and learn from what went

wrong. As a result lots of thought and careful planning went into each school visit over the course of the year.

Much of what I have learned this year in terms of facilitation has been actively modeled for me at my principal cohort meetings. It was great leadership training to have an experienced facilitative leader work with a group, constantly modeling habits and behaviors which were applicable in my day to day work as a principal. The Facilitation Institute gave me the opportunity to observe Alan work in a more deliberate way around introducing protocols. He simultaneously pushed me to reflect and write about my experiences, which has helped me to take a step back from my work. I also chose to do the Institute with both curriculum and team leaders from my school which would give them the opportunity to learn more and think more carefully about work with their teams.

From our collective experience as a school team it was an overwhelmingly positive experience. The teacher leaders have a better sense of the work they can do in their teams and that all the work does not rest with them as individuals. They have been provided with a set of tools which can help them to work with their teams and each person has tried something they have learned at their own meetings. From the experience of learning together I feel I have a stronger group of leaders who can better do the work back at school. Each teacher leader has reported feeling an even greater investment in their work and sense of responsibility for the group. I know that I feel a larger commitment to the team/curriculum leaders and am already thinking about ways to better support them for next year.

### **Me, Myself and the NSRF Facilitator Standards**

I am very happy that I decided to stop and write about what I have learned this year. I think that my work in my school community is just beginning in many ways. The professional relationships across the school are just taking root. The focus for our collective work as a school next year should continue to take place largely in curriculum teams. We are struggling as a school to better shape classrooms to meet the needs of all our students. We are working to put together an alternative model of assessment together that is authentic and meaningful for our students. We will continue to tweak our structures to better support our most struggling learners and will not stop until we feel we are serving them as productively as possible. So...as a facilitative leader what do I need to continue to develop in terms of my own work? How can I continue to learn and grow in my role? Where can I find support and get feedback?

I am very interested in strengthening myself in terms of all the standards, particularly in the broad category of Using Authentic Public Learning for Equitable Outcomes. I am interested in promoting the creation of Critical Friends Group for teachers in my school...and have more teachers have the opportunity to be trained facilitators. I will also seek to create a CFG, through the support of NSRF NY for new, small school principals. I am interested in finding a forum that can provide support and feedback for leaders who are struggling with many similar leadership questions. I would like to have the opportunity to continue to practice my own facilitation skills outside of my school

and will look for opportunities to do this work in different forums. I think that every school leader and teacher should stop and reflect on what they have learned each school year. You are so close to the work that it is difficult to take steps back and it is often through stepping out of the zone that you gain a perspective which helps you to plan thoughtfully for the future. I look forward to working hard at being a more effective facilitator since I now have a greater appreciation of the work and the skills involved in working with others.

A big thanks to the founding Landmark High School team, my teachers, my principal's cohort, and Alan for sharing the work with me.