



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROTOCOL

This protocol provides the basic structure for our learning community discussion. Also known as a “consultancy protocol,” it enables a group of practitioners to work together to address the difficult dilemmas they face in their work. Problem of Practice protocols are commonly used in schools; this protocol is adapted from one created by the School Reform Initiative (<http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/consultancy.pdf>).

WHAT IS A PROBLEM OF PRACTICE?

A problem of practice is a dilemma that you face in your work that you cannot easily resolve. The dilemmas that work well in this context are ones that can be adequately described in 5 minutes or less, but are sufficiently complex to generate meaningful conversation.

HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

The first step in a problem of practice session is to assemble groups of 3-6 participants, and to select roles. Roles include:

- **Presenter:** Presents a dilemma for the group to consider
- **Facilitator:** Keeps time, and keeps the process on track; may also consult depending on group size
- **Consultants:** Ask questions of the presenter, and make suggestions

The process (23-45 minutes) proceeds as follows:

1. The **presenter** provides an overview of the dilemma they are facing. The presentation should include a brief summary of the dilemma, and a framing question for the group (**2-5 Minutes**).
2. The **consultancy group** asks *clarifying* questions of the presenter. These should be questions that can be answered briefly and factually (**2-5 minutes**).
3. The **consultancy group** asks *probing* questions of the presenter. These questions should be more in-depth, and should help the presenter to think differently about their dilemma. Consultants should avoid making suggestions at this stage (**5-10 Minutes**).
4. The group discusses the dilemma. At this stage, group members more fully analyze the dilemma, and can make suggestions to the presenter on dealing with the dilemma (**10-15 Minutes**).
5. The **presenter** summarizes what they heard and how their thinking has evolved through the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**).
6. The **facilitator** leads a brief conversation that allows the group to reflect on the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**).



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROTOCOL-FACILITATOR GUIDE

As the facilitator, your main job is to keep the process moving. This guide provides tips on maximizing the effectiveness of the Problem of Practice process.

GENERAL FACILITATION TIPS:

You will introduce the presenter, and briefly describe the Problem of Practice process. Let participants know that:

- *You as facilitator will provide basic instructions for each stage of the process, and will keep time*
- *Encourage consultants to take notes on their worksheets*

YOUR ROLE IN THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROCESS:

1. The **presenter** provides an overview of the dilemma they are facing. The presentation should include a brief summary of the dilemma, and a framing question for the group (**2-5 Minutes**).
2. The **consultancy group** asks *clarifying* questions of the presenter. These should be questions that can be answered briefly and factually (**2-5 minutes**).

As facilitator, you should remind presenters to keep their answers here brief and factual. Questions should lend themselves to brief, factual answers. You may ask questions if you are also acting as a consultant.

3. The **consultancy group** asks *probing* questions of the presenter. These questions should be more in-depth, and should help the presenter to think differently about their dilemma. Consultants should avoid making suggestions at this stage (**5-10 Minutes**).

As facilitator, you should keep the conversation moving, and ask questions if you feel something is still missing from the conversation.

4. The group discusses the dilemma. At this stage, group members more fully analyze the dilemma, and can make suggestions to the presenter on dealing with the dilemma (**10-15 Minutes**).

As facilitator, your main role here is to ensure that everyone's voice is heard. This may mean asking for input from individuals who are not actively participating.

5. The **presenter** summarizes what they heard and how their thinking has evolved through the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**)
6. The **facilitator** leads a brief conversation that allows the group to reflect on the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**).

You may ask the group reflective questions here (e.g. What is your main takeaway from this conversation? How is this dilemma similar to dilemmas you face in your own work? What did you learn today and what do you want to know more about?)



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROTOCOL-PRESENTER GUIDE

As the presenter, you will present a dilemma for the group to consider. This guide provides tips on framing your dilemma, and on other aspects of your role throughout the Problem of Practice process.

FRAMING YOUR DILEMMA:

The dilemmas that work well in this context are ones that can be adequately described in 5 minutes or less, but are sufficiently complex to generate meaningful conversation. Some features of good dilemmas are:

- *They occupy your thinking, or you return to them often*
- *They seem intractable; that is, they are not moving toward resolution*
- *They are within your control or influence to some extent*
- *They are important to you and you are willing to work on them*

YOUR ROLE IN THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROCESS:

1. The **presenter** provides an overview of the dilemma they are facing. The presentation should include a brief summary of the dilemma, and a framing question for the group (**2-5 Minutes**).

Provide relevant details of your dilemma for the group to consider. Also provide the group with a framing question to guide their thinking and steer the conversation. Try to frame your question in a way that gets to the heart of the matter.

2. The **consultancy group** asks *clarifying* questions of the presenter. These should be questions that can be answered briefly and factually (**2-5 minutes**).

Keep your answers here brief and factual

3. The **consultancy group** asks *probing* questions of the presenter. These questions should be more in-depth, and should help the presenter to think differently about their dilemma. Consultants should avoid making suggestions at this stage (**5-10 Minutes**).

You can answer in some depth here, but should ensure that all questions are heard

4. The group discusses the dilemma. At this stage, group members more fully analyze the dilemma, and can make suggestions to the presenter on dealing with the dilemma (**10-15 Minutes**).
5. The **presenter** summarizes what they heard and how their thinking has evolved through the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**)

What changes might you make after the conversation? What are your first action steps?

6. The **facilitator** leads a brief conversation that allows the group to reflect on the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**).



PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROTOCOL-CONSULTANT GUIDE

As a member of the consultancy group, your main job is to listen and ask questions. This guide provides tips on maximizing the effectiveness of the Problem of Practice process.

GENERAL CONSULTANT TIPS:

You will be listening for the first part of the process, then you will be driving the conversation through the questions that you ask and the suggestions you provide. Some general guidelines for effective consultancy are:

- *Listen actively to the presenter as they describe their dilemma*
- *Take notes throughout the process*
- *Try to withhold suggestions until the discussion phase of the process (step 4 below)*

YOUR ROLE IN THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROCESS:

1. The **presenter** provides an overview of the dilemma they are facing. The presentation should include a brief summary of the dilemma, and a framing question for the group (**2-5 Minutes**).
2. The **consultancy group** asks *clarifying* questions of the presenter. These should be questions that can be answered briefly and factually (**2-5 minutes**).

Keep it simple with your clarifying questions (“who,” “what,” and “when” questions) work best here. Remember you will have an opportunity for deeper questioning during the next phase.

3. The **consultancy group** asks *probing* questions of the presenter. These questions should be more in-depth, and should help the presenter to think differently about their dilemma. Consultants should avoid making suggestions at this stage (**5-10 Minutes**).

You can use this phase to ask “why” and “how” questions. Think of this as an opportunity to begin broadening the presenter’s perspective on the dilemma as well as your own.

4. The group discusses the dilemma. At this stage, group members more fully analyze the dilemma, and can make suggestions to the presenter on dealing with the dilemma (**10-15 Minutes**).

Here, you are free to provide suggestions, to draw connections to your own experience, and to generally have a deep discussion of the dilemma you are considering. As you are thinking about your role here, ask yourself, “Is this dilemma like another dilemma?” “Do I have experience or expertise to offer?” “What would I do in the short- and the long-term if I were facing this dilemma?”

5. The **presenter** summarizes what they heard and how their thinking has evolved through the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**)
6. The **facilitator** leads a brief conversation that allows the group to reflect on the consultancy process (**2-5 Minutes**).