Consultancy Protocol
Overview, Preparation, and Implementation

The Consultancy Protocol is an adaptation of one developed by Gene Thompson-Grove as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools’ National Re: Learning Faculty Program, and further adapted and revised for use by ESE’s Office of College and Career Readiness

Case Consultancy Overview

A consultancy is a structured process for helping an individual or a team to think more expansively about a particular, concrete 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 dilemma at that time.

A dilemma is a puzzle, an issue that raises questions, an idea that seems to have conceptual gaps, something about process or product that you just can’t figure out. Sometimes it will relate to student or adult work in classrooms, but often it is a dilemma that crosses over many parts of the educational process. For the purposes of the case consultancy, the dilemma should be concrete and specific (the more concrete the dilemma, the better the feedback).

For our College and Career Readiness regional sessions, the case consultancy dilemma can be on any topic related to reaching your district or region’s college and career readiness goals. This dilemma should be related to something that is actionable by district/regional practice. To get the most out of this experience, bring something that is truly puzzling your team about your practice. It is riskier to do, but we promise that you will learn more! Please plan to be as specific about your dilemma as possible. See pages 2 and 3 below for guidance on how to best prepare for the case consultancy process so that your team maximizes the benefits of this session.

Each program team will be paired with another team (or teams) for the case consultancy. Each team will share the background on the dilemma and pose a question to the other team for their consideration and feedback. The facilitator will then ask the teams to switch roles (so the team that presented first will then play the role of providing feedback for the other team). See the "Implementation" section below for more information about the format and process of the case consultancy session. The case consultancy pairs will be facilitated by Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staff and our partners.
Preparing for the Case Consultancy Session

The following steps are the suggested guidance for preparing for the case consultancy session. More detail about these steps is provided below.

1. **Consider possible dilemmas**
2. **Reflect on your dilemma**
3. **Create a dilemma focus question**
4. **Critique your focus question**
5. **Prepare to present on your dilemma**

1. **Consider possible dilemmas.** Think about a dilemma that your team is facing that relates to college access and success for your students. Dilemmas deal with issues with which your team is struggling or that you are unsure about. Some criteria to consider when selecting your dilemma include:
   - Is it something that is bothering you and your team enough that your thoughts and discussions regularly return to the dilemma?
   - Is it an issue/dilemma that is not already on its way to being resolved?
   - Is it an issue/dilemma that does not depend on getting other people to change (in other words, can your team affect the dilemma by changing your own behavior or practice)?
   - Is it something that is important to you and the work of your team, and is it something you all are actually willing to work on?

2. **Reflect on your dilemma.** Do some reflective writing about your dilemma. You may first want to have members of your team reflect on their own, before sharing their thoughts with the group. Some questions that might help are:
   - Why is this a dilemma for our team? Why is this dilemma important for each of us?
   - If you could take a snapshot of this dilemma, what would you/we see?
   - What have you/we done already to try to remedy or manage the dilemma?
   - What have been the results of those attempts?
   - Who do you hope changes? Who do you hope will take action to resolve this dilemma? *If your answer is not you, you need to change your focus.* You will want to present a dilemma that is about your practice, actions, behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions, and not someone else’s.
   - What do you assume to be true about this dilemma, and how have these assumptions influenced your thinking about the dilemma?
   - **What is your focus question?** A focus question summarizes your dilemma and helps focus the feedback (see the next step).

3. **Create a dilemma focus question.** As a team, frame a focus question for your Consultancy group to engage with: Put your dilemma into question format *(see examples below).*
   - Try to pose a question around the dilemma that seems to get to the heart of the matter.
   - Remember that the question you pose will guide the Consultancy group in their discussion of the dilemma.
• Frame your question thoughtfully. What do you REALLY want to know? What is your real dilemma? Questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” generally provide less feedback for the team with the dilemma, so avoid those kinds of questions.

4. **Critique your focus question** (if possible, before coming to the session).
   • Is this question important to our practice?
   • Is this question important to student learning and success?
   • Is this question important to others in my area?

5. **Prepare to present on your dilemma.** Plan to come to the session with a plan for how you will succinctly describe the contextual information of your dilemma so that the other team has enough information to discuss your focus question.
   • Your background description will end with the question for the other team to consider.
   • It is often helpful to also write your dilemma (maximum 1 page) for the other team to review during the discussion (if you decide to develop a short written description of your dilemma please bring 10 copies to the meeting).
   • Decide who on your team will be responsible for presenting the dilemma.

**Generic Examples of Dilemmas**

• Despite the backing of our work, we feel like we are the only ones at the school who care about addressing the challenge of focusing on preparing low income, first generation college students and supporting them to enter college without having to take remedial coursework.
  **Question:** What can we do to engage more people at all levels to engage with, support and set high expectations for high school students?

• Our summer program seemed to be a great success – attendance was high, disciplinary issues were minimal, and students were engaged and excited about what they were doing. But we’re not seeing those successes translate into the school year. These same students seem to be reverting to the patterns of disengagement that we saw last year.
  **Question:** What can we do to help students translate success in one program into another setting? How can we build on the success of the summer during the course of the school year?

• It seems many adults in our region just don’t believe that all students can succeed in high school and attend college. They seem to ‘cut their losses’ and figure we’ll always ‘lose’ some.
  **Question:** What can we do to help all faculty and staff believe in the potential of all of our students, and translate that into practice that makes a difference for the youth?

• No matter how hard we try to be inclusive and ask for everyone’s ideas, about half of the people don’t want to do anything new — they think things were just fine before.
  **Question:** How do we work with the people who don’t want to change without alienating them?
Implementation

A case consultancy is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma. At our meeting, each team will be paired with another team to share their dilemma and focus question. Each team will have an opportunity to be present their dilemma (“presenting program team”), as well as reflect on another team’s dilemma (“consulting team”).

**Purpose:** To engage program teams in thinking creatively and analytically about their work. To promote cross-program sharing of ideas in order to advance our collective work.

**Total Time:** Approximately 70 minutes total and 25 minutes for each consultancy (steps 1-6). 

*NOTE: each team should take time to review the Overview and Preparation guidance and agree on a focus question to bring for consultation*

**Roles:** Each team needs to designate someone to present the group’s dilemma. Each consultation pair (two teams) will be assigned a facilitator to remind the group about the process and the timeframes.

**Ground Rules:**
- Discuss only what you are comfortable sharing
- Respect the other group’s privacy and confidentiality after leaving the session
- Keep cell phones on silent or vibrate 😄
- Keep focused and be specific – use examples
- Avoid or explain acronyms
- Avoid side-talking
- Acknowledge differences of opinion – explore rather than debate
- Need to follow-up or need really detailed information? Get contact info.

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<tr>
<th>Time allotted</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td><strong>OPENING:</strong> The facilitator reviews the case consultancy protocol (steps 1-6 below) and selects a team to present first (presenting team).</td>
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<td>5 minutes</td>
<td><strong>1.</strong> The <strong>presenting group</strong> gives an overview of the dilemma and frames a focus question for the <strong>consulting group</strong> to consider. The framing of this question, as well as the quality of the presenter’s reflection on the dilemma being discussed, are key features of this protocol.</td>
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<td>5 minutes</td>
<td><strong>2.</strong> The Consultancy group asks <strong>clarifying</strong> questions of the presenter — that is, questions that have <em>brief, factual</em> answers.</td>
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<td>5 minutes</td>
<td><strong>3.</strong> The group asks <strong>probing</strong> questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded so that they help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about the dilemma. The presenter may respond to the group’s questions, but there is</td>
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**4.** The presenting group steps back from the consulting group to avoid the temptation to become part of the consulting group’s conversation. The presenting group is silent during the next 5 minutes! This can be the hardest part of the protocol to adhere to, as the presenters may hear things they want to jump in to clarify. Yet having the presenters stay silent is one of the most important elements of the protocol.

10 minutes

**5.** The consulting group reflects on what they heard and engages in a discussion of the following questions:
- What assumptions does the presenting team seem to be making?
- What questions does the dilemma raise for us? (These questions should not be veiled suggestions for action, but true ponderings.)

CAUTION: It can be tempting for the consulting group to jump straight into suggesting actions the presenting group might consider taking. However, it is often much more valuable to work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively, providing the presenting group with new ways to think about their dilemma.

The presenting group takes notes while listening.

**5 minutes**

**6.** The presenting group reflects on what they heard and on what they are now thinking. They “return” to the large group, sharing anything that particularly resonated for them during any part of the process.

**Reverse Roles:** The presenting team becomes consulting team and vice versa. Repeat steps 1 through 6.

**5 minutes**

**CLOSING:** The facilitator will lead a brief conversation about the group’s observation of the Consultancy process. In what ways did the protocol affect your understanding of the dilemma?

*Clarifying questions:*
- Can be answered briefly (often with simply a “yes” or “no”)
- Are informational
- Help the presenter clarify the dilemma so that there is a clear presentation to the Consultancy group

**Probing questions**
- Requires depth of thought
- Helps get to the heart of the dilemma