

## Chapter 6

# Creating a Results Orientation in a Professional Learning Community

### Part One

#### The Case Study: Creating a Results Orientation at the School, Team, and Teacher Level

*Members of a professional learning community continually assess their effectiveness on the basis of results: tangible evidence their students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their future success.*

When Aretha Ross was hired as a new superintendent of the Supreme School District, the Board of Education made it clear that its Strategic Plan for School Improvement was the pride of the district. Every 5 years the board engaged the community and staff in a comprehensive planning process intended to provide a sense of direction for the district and all of its schools and programs. A committee of key stakeholders oversaw the creation of the plan during a 6-month development process. Each member was responsible for reporting back periodically to the group he or she represented to ensure accurate representation and ongoing communication. The committee held a series of community focus groups to solicit feedback from hundreds of parents, analyzed quantitative data, and generated qualitative data through a series of surveys to community, staff, and parents. The district mission statement provided the foundation of the document:

*It is the mission of our schools to provide a rigorous academic curriculum in a safe, caring, and enjoyable learning environment that enables each and every child to realize his or her potential and become a responsible and productive citizen and lifelong learner fully equipped to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.*

The plan provided the vision for the district and its schools, as well as core beliefs, strategic goals, key objectives, operational principles, and performance outcomes. With its adoption by the Board of Education, it became the blueprint

for school improvement in the district. Each school was then called upon to create an annual school improvement plan (SIP) aligned with the district's strategic plan.

Superintendent Ross was impressed by the effort that went into the strategic planning process and with the heft of the resulting document, but she was curious to see how it was implemented in the schools. In late October she scheduled a meeting with Harry Lee Lewis, principal of the Elvis Presley Elementary School (nickname: The Kings), to discuss the improvement process of that school.

Principal Lewis explained that the SIP adopted by the staff the previous month was linked to the district goal of "Preparing students to succeed as members of a global community and global economy." The Presley School Improvement Committee had analyzed the results from the previous state assessment of third and fifth graders and concluded that word recognition was an area of weakness for students. The committee reasoned that students would not be prepared to succeed as members of a global community if they were not proficient in such an important skill. The committee recommended that the staff adopt a school improvement goal of "Improved student achievement in word recognition as indicated on the state assessment." The faculty agreed to this with little debate. Principal Lewis assured Superintendent Ross that this same process was the standard procedure in all of the district's schools.

Superintendent Ross was troubled somewhat by the explanation of this improvement process. She realized the state assessment was administered only to third- and fifth-grade students at Presley, and she questioned how much impact the school's goal was having on the other grade levels. Furthermore, she questioned whether the SIP process described to her fostered the commitment to continuous improvement she hoped to see in every school.

Superintendent Ross decided to do some informal investigating by visiting the third-grade team at Presley as its members met in their weekly meeting. She asked if they felt teachers in other grade levels were helping address the language arts goal established by Presley's School Improvement Committee. After some awkward silence, the team members admitted they did not remember the goal, and asked if she could remind them of it.

Superintendent Ross did not want to generalize based upon one school, so she made arrangements to visit four other schools that week. In each, she discovered a similar situation. She was convinced that despite the board's affection for the Strategic Plan, it was neither impacting practice in the classroom nor contributing to a culture of continuous improvement. She knew there was little reason to believe students would achieve at higher levels until principals and teachers became much more interested in and responsible for improved results. What she did not know was what steps the district might take to foster a results orientation.



## Reflection

How does a school or district create a results orientation among administrators and teachers—the very people who are called upon to improve results?

## Part Two Here's How

We have repeatedly listed a *results orientation* as one of the characteristics of a professional learning community. It is a fact, however, that organizations do not focus on results: the people within them do, or they do not. There is little evidence to suggest that centralized formal strategic planning creates such an orientation. In fact, one comprehensive study of strategic planning over a 30-year period chronicled its failure to impact results (Mintzberg, 1994).

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If formal, district-led strategic planning processes do not create a results orientation, will handing the improvement process over to schools be a more effective alternative? The Consortium on Productivity in Schools (1995) answered that question with a resounding No! and concluded:

Site based management cannot overcome lack of clear goals and goal overloading. . . . Site based management does not substitute for the lack of stable, limited, and well-defined goals for schools. . . . Otherwise the agendas of site based school improvement drift into non-academic and administrative matters. (pp. 46–47)

The challenge for Superintendent Ross, and for any leader who hopes to improve student achievement, is to engage all members of the organization in processes to:

- Clarify priorities.
- Establish indicators of progress to be monitored carefully.
- Embed continuous improvement throughout the organization.

In simpler terms, she must help every employee of the district, but particularly teachers and principals, focus on results. No school or district creates a results orientation by accident. Educators shift their focus from activities to outcomes and from intentions to results only when leaders establish effective processes and well-defined parameters to shift collective attention in the right direction.



No school or district creates a results orientation by accident.

One of the most powerful strategies to create a results orientation throughout a district is for leaders to:

1. Identify a limited number of very focused goals.
2. Use well-designed processes to drive those goals into every classroom in every school.

### Limit District Goals

We have asked the following question hundreds of times to teachers throughout North America: “How many of you feel that your efforts to improve your school have been hampered by an insufficient number of district and state improvement initiatives?” The question is always met with howls of laughter. Veteran educators have become inured to the sheer volume of frequent, fragmented, and uncoordinated new projects, programs, and reforms that wash upon them in waves. They suffer from what Doug Reeves (2004) has called the “irrefutable law of initiative fatigue” (p. 59) as each new improvement scheme they are called upon to adopt saps energy, resources, and attention from those that preceded it.

Superintendent Ross is far more likely to provide clear and focused direction to staff throughout the district if she replaces the voluminous strategic planning process with a few very specific goals that flow directly from a clearly articulated, compelling purpose for the district and its schools. For example, the district could convey the message that its fundamental purpose is to help all students learn at high levels by adopting such simple goals as these:

- All students will successfully complete every course and every grade level and will demonstrate proficiency on local, state, and national assessments.
- We will eliminate the gaps in student achievement that are connected to race, socioeconomic status, and gender.

These broad overarching goals can then be translated into goals for each school, as shown in the following example.

In order to help achieve district goals, schools must:

1. Increase student achievement and close the achievement gap in literacy and numeracy in every elementary school, using a variety of local, state, and national indicators to document improved learning on the part of our students.
2. Increase student achievement and close the achievement gap in all areas of our middle and secondary schools, using a variety of local, state, and national indicators to document improved learning on the part of our students.

*Replace the voluminous strategic planning process with a few very specific goals that flow directly from a clearly articulated, compelling purpose for the district and its schools.*





3. Provide more students with access to our most rigorous curriculum in each subject area and grade level.

## Speak With One Voice

District goals are most powerful when the entire central office speaks with one voice in communicating the significance of the goals. District offices often have a tendency to send mixed messages, thereby creating a cacophony of competing interests. As Becky wrote, "When all central office administrators are separately chanting, 'Pay attention to my department's directive! My initiatives are the priority!' they sow seeds of confusion, frustration, and cynicism in schools" (2003, p. 16).

Superintendent Ross could avoid this by insisting her central office function as a unified team with each member working interdependently to achieve district goals—goals for which they would be held mutually accountable. The district team could then clarify how each member was to contribute to the goals in a coordinated way and how each department could customize services to support schools in their efforts to achieve district goals. The central office could then serve as a clearinghouse for best practices, resources, and training and as a conduit for sharing the effective practices used throughout the district so that schools could learn from one another.

The central office could communicate the importance of these goals by pursuing them with constancy and shielding schools from competing interests and initiatives (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Leaders do not build coherence within their organizations when they announce new priorities every year. Goals such as the ones listed in the previous section should represent a life's work rather than a short-term project, and therefore the district should commit to these goals year after year until they are achieved. New hot topics will be touted on the professional development circuit, political leaders will come and go, and special interest groups will demand schools pay more attention to their cause. Rather than reacting to each shift in the wind by placing more initiatives on their schools, the central office staff must help buffer them from the constant turbulence so educators can stay the course.

The Schaumburg Elementary School District 54 in suburban Chicago has made a concerted effort to create coherence within the district by focusing on a few key goals and protecting schools from competing initiatives. In leading that effort, Superintendent Ed Rafferty surveys every principal, assistant principal, and central office administrator to solicit advice regarding what the district office could do and, equally as important, what it could *stop* doing in order to help schools concentrate on improved student achievement. The district- and school-level leadership at Schaumburg work in partnership to focus

Goal  
Coherence

District PLC

\*  
↓ This requires low-leadership turnover.

Rather than reacting to each shift in the wind by placing more initiatives on their schools, the central office staff must help buffer educators from the constant turbulence so they can stay the course.

on “first things first,” and they recognize that some things need not be done at all. They use the Central Office Effectiveness Feedback Tool (pages 123–125) to obtain honest feedback on how effective the central office is in supporting each school and to gather suggestions for how they can better assist staff in raising student achievement.

## Translate District Initiatives Into School Goals



Limiting district goals and initiatives is a necessary step in creating a results orientation, but it is not sufficient. Steps must also be taken to ensure that district goals guide the work of individual schools and the professionals within each classroom. One of the most effective strategies for bringing district goals to life is to insist that all schools create goals that are specifically linked to district goals.

But before this can be done, schools and districts must be in agreement about what is meant by the word “goal”; it is one of those terms that can mean many different things to different people within an organization. The SMART goal acronym (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2005) provides much-needed clarity to the term. Goals are SMART when they are strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and timebound.

Superintendent Ross should insist that each principal presents a brief, succinct school improvement plan that establishes improvement targets for one or more of the goals established by the district. The school’s plan should stipulate both the past level of performance and the improvement goal for the indicator being monitored.

For example, a school might establish the following SMART goals based on the district’s two goals (“All students will successfully complete every course and every grade level and will demonstrate proficiency on local, state, and national assessments,” and, “We will eliminate the gaps in student achievement that are connected to race, socioeconomic status, and gender.”)

1. Our Reality: Last year, 14% of the grades assigned to our students were failing grades.

Our Goal: This year, we will reduce the percentage of failing grades to 7% or less.

2. Our Reality: Last year, 76% of our students met the proficiency standard on the state math test.

Our Goal: This year, we will increase the percentage of students meeting the proficiency standard on the state math test to 80% or higher.



## Central Office Effectiveness Feedback Tool

The purpose of this information-gathering tool is to obtain honest feedback on how effective the central office is in supporting each of our schools. We also want your feedback on how we can better assist you in raising student achievement. We ask that every principal and assistant principal complete the tool. We also ask that all central office administrators complete the tool, answering each question as they believe it will be answered by building principals. The information will be compiled to determine district trends and used as a basis for improving or restructuring support and services to our schools.

Please check:

- Principal       Assistant Principal       Central Office Administrator

Given that:

- a high level of student achievement is an expectation for every school,
- there are no new funds available,
- the central office is fully committed to supporting each school in their improvement efforts,
- there are no sacred or untouchable programs or services, and
- honesty with a problem-solving focus is valued,

please provide us with specific feedback on the following questions.

1. What do you feel are the top three priorities of the district?

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2. What can the central office do to better support you in getting your job done? Please provide specific suggestions.

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3. What tasks required by the central office would you recommend be simplified or eliminated to give you more time to focus on student achievement? Please be specific.

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4. What supports need to be changed, restructured, or created to enhance your school improvement efforts? Please be as specific as possible.

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5. As a district, in what areas do we need to be tighter? Please be as specific as possible.

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6. As a district, in what areas do we need to be looser? Please be as specific as possible.

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7. How do you want the principal and assistant principal meetings to be structured?

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8. How do you want other administrative meetings to be structured?

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9. Do you feel you have the support of the central office when dealing with difficult personnel issues? Please provide specific examples.

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10. Is the central office modeling what the district professes to be important? Please provide specific examples.

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11. As a district, are we asking the right questions about how to improve student learning? Please be as specific as possible.

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12. As a district, are we effectively monitoring the right and important things? Please provide specific examples.

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13. As a district, do we pay sufficient attention to celebrations? Please provide specific examples.

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14. Does the central office provide a sense of coherence, speak with one voice, and help you in clarifying the important issues, or does it send mixed messages? Please provide specific examples.

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15. Check your top two areas of need and then explain what we can do as a district to provide leadership and support for your needs.

- Assessment \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Bilingual Education \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Curriculum Development and Clarification \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Data Analysis and Storage \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Instructional Practices \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Professional Development \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Special Education \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Staffing \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Systematic and Timely Interventions for Students Who Need Extra Support \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Technology \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. Is there any additional information you would like to give us on our performance as a central office?

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### SMART Goals Are:

**S**trategic and Specific

**M**easurable

**A**ttainable

**R**esults-Oriented

**T**imebound

3. Our Reality: Last year, 10% of the graduating class completed advanced placement courses or the capstone course in a departmental sequence.

Our Goal: This year, we will increase the percentage of students taking advanced placement or capstone courses in a departmental sequence to 20% or higher.

Notice the link between these goals and the district goals. Each school goal, if attained, would contribute to progress toward the district goals.

### Link School Goals to Team Goals

The next critical step in this process is to ensure that each collaborative team translates one or more of the school goals into a SMART goal that drives the work of the team. As we wrote earlier, the very definition of a team is “*a group of people working **interdependently** to achieve a **common goal** for which members are held **mutually accountable**.*” One of the most powerful strategies for building the capacity of staff to work effectively in collaborative teams is to create the conditions that require them to work together to accomplish a specific goal. The SMART Goal Worksheets on pages 127–132 provide examples of how different school goals might be translated into SMART goals for collaborative teams. A blank SMART Goal Worksheet appears on page 133.



One of the most effective strategies for bringing district goals to life is to insist that all schools create goals that are specifically linked to district goals.

### Focus on Results, Not Activities

Once again, a school that defines its purpose as “High levels of learning for all students” will insist that teams include the language of learning in their goals. This is contrary to the traditional approach of writing goals that focus on evidence of what teachers will do rather than on evidence of what students will learn. Statements such as, “We will integrate technology into our course,” “We will align our curriculum with the newly adopted textbook,” or “We will increase the use of cooperative learning activities,” may describe worthwhile initiatives, but they do not represent goals. If the purpose of these initiatives is to increase student learning, that purpose should be explicitly stated in a goal that



# SMART Goal Worksheet: Third-Grade Team

**School:** George Washington Elementary    **Team Name:** Third-Grade Team    **Team Leader:** Theresa Smith

**Team Members:** Ken Thomas, Joe Ramirez, Cathy Armstrong, Amy Wu

**District Goal(s):** We will increase student achievement and close the achievement gap in all areas of our middle and secondary schools, using a variety of local, state, and national indicators to document improved learning on the part of our students.

**School Goal(s):** We will:

1. Increase the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency on both a national reading proficiency assessment and on the state test.
2. Eliminate the achievement gap for minority students.

Team SMART Goal	Strategies and Action Steps	Responsibility	Timeline	Evidence of Effectiveness
<p><b>Our Reality:</b> Last year, 18% of our third graders were unable to meet grade-level proficiency standards in reading fluency and comprehension as measured by a standardized, individualized assessment program for early literacy development. Six percent of Caucasian and 33% of minority students were unable to demonstrate proficiency.</p>	<p>We will create a common team schedule that reserves 8:30 to 10:30 for language arts each day. We will designate 45 minutes (9:45 to 10:30) each day for regrouping students into three groups (intensive support, strategic support, and achieving benchmark) based on demonstration of reading fluency and comprehension.</p>	<p>Third-grade team will adhere to the agreed-upon schedule and identify the appropriate reading group for each student by the end of September.</p>	<p>End of September</p>	<p>Students will be assigned to one of three groups on the basis of individual reading assessment results.</p>

SMART Goal Worksheet: Third-Grade Team (continued)

Team SMART Goal	Strategies and Action Steps	Responsibility	Timeline	Evidence of Effectiveness
<p><b>Our Goal:</b> This year, 100% of third graders will demonstrate proficiency in reading fluency and comprehension as measured by the standardized, individualized program for early literacy.</p>	<p>The team will expand to include the special education teacher, Title I teacher, speech therapist, and literacy coach during the designated 45 minutes each day. Students in need of intensive support will be assigned to a member of the team in groups of no more than four students. Students in need of more strategic support will be assigned to groups of no more than eight students. Students at benchmark proficiency will be assigned to the remaining team members for reading enrichment and extension activities created by the team. Student proficiency will be monitored on an ongoing basis and membership in the groups will be fluid.</p>	<p>The team will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work with the principal and staff members listed above to create the schedule that allows for this intervention.</li> <li>2. Create a series of ongoing assessments of reading fluency and comprehension and analyze the results.</li> <li>3. Align assessments with the content and format of the state test for language arts.</li> <li>4. Identify specific and precise instructional strategies to address the needs of students assigned to each group.</li> <li>5. Create a variety of enrichment activities for proficient readers, including Junior Great Books reading circles, independent and group research projects, computer-based explorations, silent sustained reading, and teacher read-alouds.</li> </ol>	<p>The team will administer the standardized assessment three times this year: in mid-September, January, and late April.</p> <p>The team will develop and administer its own assessments every 6 weeks.</p>	<p>Evidence will include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Student movement to higher groups</li> <li>2. All students demonstrating fluency and comprehension on the standardized assessment</li> <li>3. All students meeting the proficiency standard on the state test in language arts</li> </ol>



# SMART Goal Worksheet: Eighth-Grade Math

**School:** Thomas Jefferson Middle School **Team Name:** Eighth-Grade Math **Team Leader:** Chris Rauch  
**Team Members:** Chris Carter, Dolores Layco, Mary Fischer

**District Goal(s):** We will increase student achievement and close the achievement gap in all areas of our middle and secondary schools, using a variety of local, state, and national indicators to document improved learning on the part of our students.

**School Goal(s):** We will:

1. Reduce the failure rate in our school.
2. Increase the percentage of students scoring at or above the established proficiency standard on the state assessment in all areas.

Team SMART Goal	Strategies and Action Steps	Responsibility	Timeline	Evidence of Effectiveness
<p><b>Our Reality:</b> Last year, 24% of our students failed one or more semesters of math. And 31% percent of our students were unable to meet the state proficiency standard in math.</p>	<p>We will align each unit of our math program with state standards, study the results of the last state assessment, identify problem areas, and develop specific strategies to address those areas in our course.</p>	<p>Entire team</p>	<p>We will complete the analysis on the teacher workday prior to the start of the year. We will review our findings prior to the start of each new unit.</p>	<p>Written analysis of state assessment and strategies to address weaknesses</p>
<p><b>Our Goal:</b> This year, we will reduce the percentage of failing grades to 10% or less and the percentage of students unable to meet state standards to no more than 15%.</p>	<p>Develop common formative assessments and administer them every 3 weeks. These assessments will provide repeated opportunities for students to become familiar with the format used on the state assessment.</p>	<p>Entire team</p>	<p>Formative assessments will be created prior to the start of each unit of instruction throughout the year. They will be administered on a day designated by the team.</p>	<p>Student performance on team-endorsed common assessments</p>



# SMART Goal Worksheet

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Members: \_\_\_\_\_

District Goal(s): \_\_\_\_\_

School Goal(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Team SMART Goal	Strategies and Action Steps	Responsibility	Timeline	Evidence of Effectiveness







Effective team goals will focus on the intended outcome rather than on the strategies to achieve the outcome.

will help answer the question, “How will we know if our strategies are resulting in gains in student learning?” Effective team goals will focus on the intended outcome rather than on the strategies to achieve the outcome.

### Create Short-Term Goals

Although a district should sustain the pursuit of a few key goals for an extended period of time, teams should be encouraged to create short-term goals that serve as benchmarks of progress. Frequent feedback and intermittent reinforcement are two factors that help sustain the effort essential to achieving challenging goals (Kouzes & Posner, 1999). A team that establishes a goal of improving student performance on a state test receives neither feedback nor reinforcement for almost a year unless it establishes some short-term goals.

For example, one team discovers that 23% of students demonstrate proficiency on a pre-assessment instrument it has administered at the beginning of the unit. The team then establishes a short-term goal that 90% of the students will demonstrate proficiency by the end of the unit. Another team reviews the results from the common assessments its members administered the previous year to determine that 64% of students were able to meet the established standard for writing proficiency by the end of October. The team sets a goal that 75% of students will meet that standard by the same date this year. In both instances, short-term goals can inform the team of progress and create a basis for celebration.

## Part Three Here’s Why

Why should educators abandon traditional strategic planning and focus instead on ensuring that each collaborative team in every school is working toward SMART goals that are specifically linked to a few school and district goals? Most simply, because there is no evidence that strategic planning leads to improved results. In his study of “great” organizations, Collins (2001) was unable to discover any link between formal planning and organizational effectiveness. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) were even more emphatic when they concluded, “Existing research on the effectiveness of formal planning efforts is clear: Planning is essentially unrelated to organizational performance” (p. 42). In his study of strategic planning in education, Reeves (2006) actually found a negative correlation between district-led formal strategic planning and improved student achievement.

Whereas effective leaders are skillful in making the complex simple, strategic planning almost inevitably makes the simple complex. The one thing most



strategic plans for school districts have in common is their girth. Voluminous tomes place far too many initiatives upon schools and obscure rather than clarify priorities. The ambiguity and interchangeable use of terms adds to the confusion. How many people can assert with confidence that they can specify the differences between a strategic goal, a key objective, and a performance outcome? Furthermore, strategic plans often serve as a barrier to the relentless action orientation of effective organizations (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Far too many school districts confuse developing or possessing a plan with taking meaningful action to ensure that something actually happens.

The biggest factor in the ineffectiveness of formal strategic planning rests on its faulty underlying assumption: some people in organizations (the leaders) are responsible for thinking and planning while others (the workers) are responsible for carrying out those plans. This separation of thought and action is the antithesis of a learning community, which requires widely dispersed leadership and strategic thinkers *throughout* the organization (Fullan, 2005a). Asking employees to follow a 5-year strategic plan chartered by others does little to generate a focus on or commitment to improved results. Engaging those employees in a process of *ongoing* continuous improvement in which they establish their own short-term goals, develop their own plans to achieve them, act on those plans, and make frequent adjustments based on their analysis of evidence is much more likely to instill a results orientation throughout the organization.

Mike Schmoker (1999, 2003) has made the most compelling case for replacing strategic planning with short-term goals created and pursued by collaborative teams of teachers. He writes, "Without explicit learning goals, we are simply not set up and organized for improvement, for results. Only such goals will allow us to analyze, monitor and adjust practice toward improvement" (1999, p. 18).

Not only do collaborative teams represent the optimum setting for the pursuit of meaningful SMART goals, but SMART goals represent an essential tool in developing powerful collaborative teams. Teams benefit when they have a few key goals that clarify the results they seek and how each member can contribute to achieving those results (Lencioni, 2005; Schaffer & Thomson, 1998). They are more effective when they see how their goals and their efforts are linked to the larger organization (Druskat & Wolf, 2001). They are strengthened from the accomplishment and celebration of short-term wins (Collins, 2001; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Kotter, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). They are more committed, empowered, and motivated when they set their own targets and create their own plans to achieve them (Axelrod, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

*There is no evidence that strategic planning leads to improved results. Effective leaders are skillful in making the complex simple; strategic planning almost inevitably makes the simple complex.*

In short, there is nothing more important in determining the effectiveness of a team than each member's understanding of and commitment to the achievement of results-oriented goals to which the group holds itself mutually accountable. Helping teams translate long-term purpose into specific, measurable short-term goals, and then helping members develop the skills to achieve those goals, is one of the most important steps leaders can take in building the capacity of a group to function as a high-performing collaborative team (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

### Attainable Goals Versus Stretch Goals

When building a results-oriented culture, leaders must find a balance between the *attainable* goals teams feel they can achieve in the short term and *stretch* goals—goals so ambitious they could not possibly be achieved unless practices within the organization change significantly (Tichy, 1997). Stretch goals have also been referred to as BHAGs: Big Hairy Audacious Goals (Collins & Porras, 1997). Attainable goals are intended to document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins. Stretch goals are intended to inspire, to capture the imagination of people within the organization, to stimulate creativity and innovation, and to serve as a unifying focal point of effort.

President John F. Kennedy announced one of the most famous stretch goals in American history when, in 1961, he declared the United States would “land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth” by the end of the decade, despite the fact that the necessary technology to achieve that goal did not exist. His pronouncement galvanized and energized the scientific community and the nation and led to the largest non-military technological endeavor ever undertaken by the United States.

But merely proclaiming stretch goals does not improve an organization. In 1989 President George Bush announced Education Goals 2000, boldly proclaiming the nation would achieve such stretch goals as, “All children in America will start school ready to learn” and, “United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement” by the new millennium. Neither goal was achieved because neither resulted in meaningful action.

Stretch goals are effective only if they stimulate action, if people begin to behave in new ways. Pronouncements without action are hopes, not goals. Furthermore, stretch goals must be *goals*, not mission statements. They must set specific targets rather than offer vague expressions or beliefs. Kennedy did not say, “We need to do something to strengthen the space program,” or, “We believe in the potential of space.” He said, “We will land a man on the moon.” “We believe in high levels of learning for all students” is not a stretch goal. “We will



**Attainable goals** document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins.

**Stretch goals** inspire, capture imagination, stimulate creativity and innovation, and unify.



ensure all students demonstrate proficiency on the state assessment,” “We will eliminate achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status,” and “We will ensure the academic success of every student in every grade level” are examples of stretch goals because they are stated as targets.

If schools and districts limit themselves to the pursuit of *attainable* goals they run the risk of never moving outside their comfort zones. Organizations are unlikely to experience dramatic improvement if they are content with creeping incrementalism—slowly inching forward over time. If the only goals educators pursue are easily attainable, the focus shifts to how good do we *have* to be rather than how good *can* we be.

On the other hand, if the only goals educators pursue are stretch goals, teachers and principals are prone to give up in hopelessness. If educators perceive goals as so unrealistic that they are unattainable and there are no successes to celebrate, they will be discouraged from taking action to achieve them.

Once again, we believe the solution to this dilemma of attainable goals versus stretch goals is found not in the “Tyranny of Or,” but in the “Genius of And.” In the early stages of building a PLC, celebrating small wins is key to sustaining the effort, and attainable goals are an essential element of results-oriented small wins. Therefore, we strongly recommend that goals established by collaborative teams should be *attainable*. Teams should feel reasonably confident they have the capacity to achieve their goals. They should be able to say, “If we seek and implement best practices, we have reason to believe we will achieve our team goal.”

District goals, however, should be clearly linked to the purpose of learning for all students, should establish challenging targets, and should require innovation and long-term commitment if they are to be achieved. District goals should be so bold that they require the development of new capacities. The best district goals will present “adaptive challenges”: challenges for which the solution is not apparent, challenges that cause us to experiment, discover, adjust, and adapt (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

## Part Four

### Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

#### The PLC Continuum

Working individually and quietly, review the continuum of a school’s progress on the PLC journey (page 139). Which point on the continuum gives the most accurate description of the current reality of your school or district? Be prepared to support your assessment with evidence and anecdotes.

After working individually, share your assessment with colleagues. Where do you have agreement? Where do you find discrepancies in the assessments? Listen to the rationales of others in support of their varying assessments. Are you able to reach agreement?

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and, “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Now consider each indicator of a professional learning community described in the left column of the Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet on page 140, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.





## Part Five

### Tips for Moving Forward: Using Goals to Focus on Results

- 1** Limit the number of district initiatives and make certain the initiatives reflect the priority of high levels of learning for all students.
- 2** Require each school and each collaborative team within the school to establish a *limited* number of SMART goals that are specifically aligned with district goals.
- 3** Provide templates for goal setting for every team. The templates should reinforce the premise that the team must focus on results rather than activities and must clarify how the achievement of the goal will be monitored and measured.
- 4** Make certain goals are team goals rather than individual goals. Remember that an effective goal will require team members to work together *interdependently* in order to achieve it. Members should be able to clarify both individual responsibilities and collective responsibilities.
- 5** Team goals should be established *by* teams rather than *for* teams. Teams should be expected to create goals that align with school and district goals and to write goals that are consistent with specified parameters. Each team should, however, enjoy considerable autonomy in articulating its goals.
- 6** Monitor work toward a goal by requiring teams to create specific products (norms, common assessments, collective analysis of results, improvement plans, and so on) that are directly related to the goal.
- 7** Celebrate progress. Plan for, seek out, and celebrate small wins.
- 8** The high levels of learning a school or team seeks for its students need not be limited to academic areas. Affective areas (for example, responsibility, empathy, self-efficacy, independence, and so on) are perfectly legitimate areas for establishing goals. There is a tendency when establishing such goals, however, to be content with the implementation of new programs or the nobleness of the cause. Neither the completion of projects nor the unassailability of good intentions should substitute for goals. Teams must discipline

themselves to address the question, “How will we know our students are achieving this goal?” for every goal they establish.

**9** District goals should include stretch goals. These goals will be so challenging that people throughout the organization will be called upon to build new capacities in order to achieve them.

**10** Be wary of the complacency that can set in when a stretch goal has been achieved. It is easy for an organization to drift into the “we have arrived” mode when it has been successful in the pursuit of a challenging goal (Collins & Porras, 1997). Combat that tendency and promote continuous improvement by celebrating the accomplishment and then creating a new stretch goal.

