

Chapter 1

A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work

We learn best by doing. We have known this to be true for quite some time. More than 2,500 years ago Confucius observed, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Most educators acknowledge that our deepest insights and understandings come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement. After all, most educators have spent four or five years *preparing* to enter the profession—taking courses on content and pedagogy, observing students and teachers in classrooms, completing student teaching under the tutelage of a veteran teacher, and so on. Yet almost without exception, they admit that they learned more in their first semester of *teaching* than they did in the four or five years they spent *preparing* to enter the profession. This is not an indictment of higher education; it is merely evidence of the power of learning that is embedded in the work.

Our profession also attests to the importance and power of learning by doing when it comes to educating our students. We want students to be *actively engaged in hands-on authentic exercises* that promote *experiential learning*. How odd, then, that a profession that pays such homage to the importance of learning by doing is so reluctant to apply that principle when it comes to developing its collective capacity to meet the needs of students. Why do institutions created for and devoted to learning not call upon the professionals within them to become more proficient in improving the effectiveness of schools by actually doing the work of school improvement? Why have we been so reluctant to learn by doing?

What Are Professional Learning Communities?

Since 1998, we have published multiple books and videos with the same two goals in mind: (1) to persuade educators that the most promising strategy for meeting the challenge of helping all students learn at high levels is to develop their capacity to function as a professional learning community

and (2) to offer specific strategies and structures to help them create PLCs in their own schools.

It has been interesting to observe the growing popularity of the term *professional learning community*. In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning. This lack of precision is an obstacle to implementing PLC processes because, as Mike Schmoker observes, “clarity precedes competence” (2004a, p. 85). Thus, we begin this handbook with an attempt to clarify our meaning of the term. To those familiar with our past work, this step may seem redundant, but we are convinced that redundancy can be a powerful tool in effective communication, and we prefer redundancy to ambiguity.

We have seen many instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a program. For example, one faculty told us that each year they implemented a new program in their school. In the previous year it had been PLC, the year prior to that it had been “understanding by design,” and the current year it was “differentiated instruction.” They had converted the names of the various programs into verbs, and the joke on the faculty was that they had been “UBDed, PLCed, and DIed.” The PLC process is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by anyone other than the staff itself. Most importantly, it is ongoing—a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it.

We have seen other instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a meeting—an occasional event when they meet with colleagues to complete a task. It is not uncommon for us to hear, “My PLC meets Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.” This perception of a PLC is wrong on two counts. First, the PLC is the larger organization and not the individual teams that comprise it. While collaborative teams are an essential part of the PLC process, the sum is greater than the individual parts. Much of the work of a PLC cannot be done by a team but instead requires a schoolwide or district-wide effort. So we believe it is helpful to think of the school or district as the PLC and the various collaborative teams as the building blocks of the PLC. Second, once again, the PLC process has a pervasive and ongoing impact on the structure and culture of the school. If educators meet with peers on a regular basis only to return to business as usual, they are not functioning as a PLC. So the PLC process is much more than a meeting.

Other educators have claimed they are members of a PLC because they engage in dialogue based on common readings. The entire staff reads the same book or article, and then members meet to share their individual impressions of what they have read. But a PLC is more than a book club. Although collective study and dialogue are crucial elements of the PLC process, the process requires people to *act* on the new information.

So, what is a PLC? We argue that it is an *ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve*. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. The following section examines the elements of the PLC process more closely.

A Focus on Learning

The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective commitments clarifying what each member will do to create such an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes.

A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.

There is no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Whereas many schools operate as if their primary purpose is to ensure that children are taught, PLCs are dedicated to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students *learn* essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions. All the other characteristics of a PLC flow directly from this epic shift in assumptions about the purpose of the school.

A Collaborative Culture With a Focus on Learning for All

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals* for which members are mutually accountable. These common goals are directly linked to the purpose of learning for all. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort and the fundamental building block of the organization. It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process. It is even more important, however, to emphasize that collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right issues.

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Collaboration is a means to an end, not the end itself. In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, *collaboration* represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to *impact* their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school.

Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality

The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning. They also inquire about their current reality—including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. They attempt to arrive at consensus on vital questions by building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions. They have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities.

Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, this heightened awareness transforms into fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits that, over time, transform the culture of the school.

Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of clients is exactly what *professionals* in any field are expected to do, whether it is curing the patient, winning the lawsuit, or helping all students learn. Members of a *professional* learning community are expected to work and learn together.

Action Orientation: Learning by Doing

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Members of PLCs are action oriented: they move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers. Henry Mintzberg's (2005) observation about training leaders applies here: deep learning requires experience, which requires taking action. It "is as much about doing in order to think as thinking in order to do" (p. 10.) In fact, the very reason that teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action.

Members of PLCs recognize that learning by doing develops a deeper and more profound knowledge and greater commitment than learning by reading, listening, planning, or thinking. Traditional schools have developed a variety of strategies to resist taking meaningful action, preferring the comfort of the familiar. Professional learning communities recognize that until members of the organization "do" differently, there is no reason to anticipate different results. They avoid paralysis by analysis and overcome inertia with action.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Inherent to a PLC are a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization. Systematic processes engage each member of the organization in an ongoing cycle of the following:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing those strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

The goal is not simply to learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning—an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, *forever*. Furthermore, participation in this process is not reserved for those designated as leaders; rather, it is a responsibility of every member of the organization.

Results Orientation

Finally, members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts in these areas—a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement—must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement. As Peter Senge and colleagues conclude, “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (1994, p. 44).

This focus on results leads each team to develop and pursue measurable improvement goals that align with school and district goals for learning. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year to gather ongoing evidence of student learning. Team members review the results from these assessments in an effort to identify and address program concerns (areas of learning where many students are experiencing difficulty). They also examine the results to discover strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching in order to learn from one another. Most importantly, the assessments are used to identify students who need additional time and

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support for learning. Frequent common formative assessments represent one of the most powerful tools in the PLC arsenal, and we will examine them in detail.

Three Big Ideas That Drive the Work of a PLC

The essence of the PLC process is captured in three big ideas:

1. The purpose of our school is to ensure all students learn at high levels.
2. Helping all students learn requires a collaborative and collective effort.
3. To assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn we must focus on results—evidence of student learning—and use results to inform and improve our professional practice and respond to students who need intervention or enrichment.

Why Don't We Apply What We Know?

As we have shared our work in support of PLCs with educators in every state in the U.S. and every province of Canada, we have become accustomed to hearing the same response: “This just makes sense.” It just makes sense that a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels would focus on *learning* rather than teaching, would ensure students had access to the same curriculum, would assess each student’s learning on a timely basis using consistent standards for proficiency, and would create systematic interventions that provide students with additional time and support for learning. It just makes sense that we accomplish more working collaboratively than we do working in isolation. It just makes sense that we would assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn on the basis of results—tangible evidence that they have actually learned. It just makes sense! In fact, we have found little overt opposition to the characteristics of a PLC.

So why don't schools *do* what they already *know* makes sense? In *The Knowing-Doing Gap*, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) explore what they regard as one of the great mysteries of organizational management: the disconnect between knowledge and action. They ask, “Why does knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fail to result in action or behavior that is consistent with that knowledge?” (p. 4).

Learning by Doing is intended to help educators close the knowing-doing gap by transforming their schools into PLCs. More specifically, it is designed to accomplish the following four objectives:

1. To help educators develop a common vocabulary and a consistent understanding of key PLC processes

2. To present a compelling argument that the implementation of the PLC process will benefit students and educators alike
3. To help educators assess the current reality in their own schools and districts
4. To convince educators to take purposeful steps to develop their capacity to function as a PLC and offer strategies and tools to help them on their journey

Helping Educators Develop a Common Vocabulary and a Consistent Understanding of Key PLC Processes

Michael Fullan observes that “terms travel easily . . . but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not” (2005, p. 67). Terms such as *professional learning community*, *collaborative teams*, *goals*, *formative assessments*, and scores of others have indeed traveled widely in educational circles. They are prevalent in the lexicon of contemporary “educationese.” If pressed for a specific definition, however, many educators would be stumped. It is difficult enough to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there is a shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when there is no common understanding and the terms mean very different things to different people within the same organization.

Developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001) contend that the transformation of both individuals and organizations requires new language. They write, “The places where we work and live are, among other things, places where certain forms of speech are promoted and encouraged, and places where other ways of talking are discouraged or made impossible” (p. 7). As educators make the cultural shift from traditional schools and districts to PLCs, a new language emerges. Therefore, we have highlighted and defined key terms used in implementing PLC processes to assist in building shared knowledge of both critical vocabulary and the concepts underlying the terms. We have also included an online glossary at go.solution-tree.com/PLCbooks that readers can download and distribute. We hope it will add to the precision and clarity of the emerging language that accompanies the creation of PLCs.

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Presenting a Compelling Argument That the Implementation of PLC Processes Will Benefit Students and Educators Alike

Jim Collins (2001) begins his best-selling book *Good to Great* with a provocative observation: “Good is the enemy of great.” “Good” organizational performance can cause complacency and inertia instead of inspiring the pursuit of continuous improvement essential to sustained greatness. Despite the persistent attacks on public schools throughout North America by politicians insisting on greater accountability, business leaders demanding better-trained workers, and members of the media lamenting the

failure of public education, most parents believe their children go to “good” schools. While they may be concerned about the quality of education throughout the country, in 2009, 74 percent of parents gave the schools their oldest child attends a grade of A or B, the highest approval rating since this annual poll was first administered in 1969 (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). So what would cause educators to explore more powerful models for learning if the general perception in the community they serve indicates they are already doing a good job? One strategy, increasingly popular in contemporary North America, is to apply sanctions and punishment for schools that fail to demonstrate improvement. The effectiveness of this strategy remains very much in question.

Another approach for motivating a faculty to initiate new practices and procedures is to present a persuasive case that there is a better, more effective, more gratifying way to approach the work. We are convinced that the PLC model makes that compelling case for any educator willing to give it meaningful consideration. The model offers a tangible, realistic, compelling vision of what schools might become. We hope to bring the PLC concept to life in ways that resonate with educators because, after all, “It just makes sense.”

Helping Educators Assess the Current Reality in Their Own Schools and Districts

More than a quarter century ago, John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene (1985) offered the common-sense conclusion that people find it a lot easier to get from point A to point B if they know where point B is and how to recognize it once they arrive. For many educators, however, school improvement initiatives have been plagued by uncertainty and confusion regarding both points A and B. They have not taken the time to clarify either the current status of their school or what they hope it will become. As a result, efforts to reform their schools have too often been characterized by random stops and starts, rather than by purposeful progression on a path of improvement. A key step in any effective improvement process is an honest assessment of the current reality—a diligent effort to determine the truth. Educators will find it easier to move forward to where they want to go if they first agree on where they are.

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Even when teachers and administrators make a good faith effort to assess their schools, they face significant obstacles. All schools have cultures: the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for a school and guide the work of the educators within it. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that educators *do not* have school cultures, but rather that the school cultures have *them*. Teachers and administrators are typically so immersed in their traditional ways of doing things that they find it difficult to step outside of those traditions to examine conventional practices from a fresh, critical perspective. Therefore, this handbook is designed not only to offer specific examples of PLC practices (to help paint

a picture of point B), but also to help educators make a frank and honest assessment of current conditions in their schools (to clarify point A).

Convincing Educators to Take Purposeful Steps to Develop Their Capacity to Function as a PLC

Our greatest hope in developing this handbook is that it will help educators take immediate and specific steps to close the knowing-doing gap in education by implementing PLC processes in their own schools and districts. Once again, it will take action on the part of educators to accomplish this objective. The research on what it takes to improve schools has been very consistent over a number of years. Most educators already know what they should do to help students achieve at higher levels, and if they don't have the necessary knowledge, it is easily accessible to them in a variety of forms. The question confronting most schools and districts is not, "What do we need to know in order to improve?" but rather, "Will we turn what we already know into action?"

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In the past we have provided study guides for our books because we discovered that many faculties use our resources in their book study groups. We call the study guide that accompanies this book an "Action Guide" (available at go.solution-tree.com/PLCbooks); we cannot stress enough that this resource is not designed for study, but rather for *action*—to help educators take the essential action steps for building their capacity to create and sustain PLCs.

Taking Action

Perhaps the greatest insight we have gained in our work with school districts across the continent is that organizations that take the plunge and actually begin *doing* the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years *preparing* to become PLCs through reading or even training. Developing the collective capacity of educators to create high-performing PLCs demands more than "workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of *working together*, and you can't learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose" (Fullan, 2005, p. 69). So let's examine some of the challenges of working together and consider mechanisms for getting better at it.