

## Chapter 5

# Building the Collaborative Culture of a Professional Learning Community

*Top down as necessary  
Bottom up as possible*

### Part One The Case Study: Are We Engaged in Collaboration or “Coblaboration”?

*Members of a professional learning community recognize they cannot accomplish their fundamental purpose of high levels of learning for all students unless they work together collaboratively. The collaborative team is the fundamental building block of a PLC.*

*Why did he wait  
3 years??*

Principal Joe McDonald was puzzled. He knew that building a collaborative culture was the key to improving student achievement. He could cite any number of research studies to support his position. He had worked tirelessly to promote collaboration and had taken a number of steps to support teachers working together. He organized each grade level in the Nemo Middle School (nickname: The Fish) into an interdisciplinary team composed of individual math, science, social studies, and language arts teachers. He created a schedule that gave teams time to meet together each day. He trained staff in collaborative skills, consensus building, and conflict resolution. He emphasized the importance of collaboration at almost every faculty meeting. He felt he had done all the right things, and for 3 years he had waited patiently to reap the reward of higher levels of student learning. But to his dismay and bewilderment, every academic indicator of student achievement monitored by the school had remained essentially the same.

Principal McDonald decided to survey the faculty to see if he could discover why all the collaboration had yielded no gains in student achievement. The satisfaction survey he developed revealed that, with very few exceptions, teachers felt their collaborative time had strengthened the bond between teachers. Specialist

teachers—those in art, music, physical education, technical education, and special education—were less enthusiastic and expressed some resentment about being lumped together in one collaborative team. In general, however, teachers seemed to enjoy working together.

Principal McDonald then decided to make a concerted effort to observe personally the workings of the teams. At the first meeting he attended, a seventh-grade team focused on the behavior of a student who had become increasingly disruptive. The team agreed to schedule a parent conference so they could present their concerns to the parent as a group. An eighth-grade team brainstormed strategies for achieving their team goal of reducing disciplinary referrals for tardiness to class. At a meeting of a second seventh-grade team, he observed a lively debate about whether or not members should accept late work from students, and if so, how many points they should deduct for each day the work was late. The fourth team he observed assigned roles and responsibilities to each member to ensure all the tasks associated with an upcoming field trip were addressed.

By the end of the fourth meeting, Principal McDonald experienced a revelation: There had been no gains in student achievement because the topics addressed by the collaborative teams were only remotely related to student learning! Armed with this insight, he convened a meeting of the faculty and shared his conclusion that teams needed to shift the focus of their dialogues to curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

The proposal met with less than wild enthusiasm. Teachers pointed out that each member of their interdisciplinary teams taught different content. How could a seventh-grade science teacher engage in meaningful work on curriculum, assessment, and instruction with a seventh-grade social studies teacher? The team of specialist teachers was even more emphatic that it was impossible for them to have meaningful conversations on those topics because of the different courses they taught. Teachers argued that since they did not share content with the colleagues on their team, it made sense that they would use their team time to focus on the one thing they did have in common: their students.

Other teachers accused Principal McDonald of abandoning the middle school concept and its commitment to the “whole child.” One highly emotional teacher charged Principal McDonald with selling out—of disregarding the emotional well-being of the children in the pursuit of higher test scores.

Principal McDonald was genuinely stunned by the reaction of the staff. He had always believed they enjoyed working together in their teams, and he assumed that merely shifting the focus of their collaboration would be a relatively simple matter. It now appeared, however, that although the staff was happy to collaborate regarding some aspects of the school’s program, they were

*Why didn't he receive team reports?*



either disinterested or adamantly opposed to addressing others. Dispirited, he retreated to his office to ponder next steps.

### Reflection

Why did Principal McDonald's efforts to build a collaborative culture in his school go awry? What steps might he take to improve upon the situation?

## Part Two Here's How

The situation in this school reflects one of the most pervasive problems in building PLCs. Most educators have gradually, sometimes grudgingly, come to acknowledge that collaborating with one's colleagues is preferable to working in isolation. Slowly, structures have been put in place to support collaboration. Increasingly staff members are assigned into teams, given time for collaboration during their contractual day, and provided with training to assist them as they begin the challenge of working together. Administrators and teachers alike take pride that the goal has been accomplished: Professionals in the building are collaborating with each other on a regular basis. The anticipated gains in student achievement, however, often fail to materialize.

We cannot stress this next point too emphatically: *The fact that teachers collaborate will do nothing to improve a school. The pertinent question is not, "Are they collaborating?" but rather, "What are they collaborating about?"* Collaboration is not a virtue in itself, and building a collaborative culture is simply a means to an end, not the end itself. The purpose of collaboration—to help more students achieve at higher levels—can only be accomplished if the professionals engaged in collaboration *are focused on the right things.*

What are the "right things" a staff would direct their attention to if high levels of learning were the focus of their collaborative efforts? Once again, we return to the four questions that drive the work of a PLC:

- What is it we want our students to learn?
- How will we know if each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn it?
- How can we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

▷ Structure  
φ culture



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Principal McDonald must first form an alliance with key members of the staff to help build a deeper understanding of the real purpose of their collaboration and then create supports and parameters to guide staff dialogue to the right topics. Staff must work together to resolve a variety of issues as they create an effective collaborative culture focused on learning.

## How Should We Organize Staff Into Teams to Promote a Focus on Learning?

The interdisciplinary team model used in the case study school can be an effective structure for collaboration, but only if certain steps are taken to change the nature of the conversation. If teachers share no common content or objectives, inevitably they will turn their attention to the one thing they do have in common: their students. A seventh-grade team's discussions regarding Johnny's behavior and Mary's attitude can be appropriate and beneficial, but at some point the team should clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions Johnny and Mary are to acquire as a result of their seventh-grade experience.

Therefore, each team in the school should be asked to create an overarching curricular goal that members will work together interdependently to achieve. For example, Principal McDonald could make staff aware of the power of nonfiction writing to improve student achievement in mathematics, science, social studies, and reading (Reeves, 2006). He could then ask each grade-level team to develop a goal to increase student achievement by becoming more effective in the instruction of nonfiction writing. The seventh-grade team would confront a series of questions as they worked together to achieve this goal, questions such as:

- How can we integrate nonfiction writing into each of our different subject areas?
- What criteria will we use in assessing the quality of student writing?
- How will we know if we are applying the criteria consistently?
- What are the most effective ways to teach nonfiction writing?
- Is there a member of the team with expertise in this area who can help the rest of us become more effective?
- How will we know if our students are becoming better writers?
- How will we know if the focus on writing is impacting achievement in our respective courses?
- What strategies will we put in place for students who struggle with nonfiction writing?
- How can we enrich the learning experience for students who are already capable writers?

*An acceptable but weak example to bring teachers together. They weren't ready to do this.*



- Are there elements of the seventh-grade curriculum we can eliminate or curtail to provide the time necessary for greater emphasis on nonfiction writing?

Principal McDonald could also foster a greater focus on learning if he created a schedule that allowed teachers to meet in content area teams as well as in grade-level teams. Middle schools make a mistake when they put all their eggs in the interdisciplinary basket. A seventh-grade math teacher can certainly benefit from conversations with colleagues who teach language arts, social studies, or science, but just as certainly that math teacher can also benefit from conversations with other math teachers. The best middle schools create different team structures to support different purposes and will focus on academic achievement as well as the behavior of their students.

*A better place  
to start*

The challenge of how to organize teachers into teams is certainly not limited to middle school. It is important for principals to recognize that the task of building a collaborative culture requires more than bringing random adults together in the hope they will discover a topic of conversation. The first and most fundamental task is to bring together those people whose responsibilities create an inherent mutual interest in exploring the four critical questions.

! *Collaboration  
requires a  
focus.*

Much work will remain in terms of helping teams develop their capacity to improve student learning, but that outcome is far more difficult to achieve without organizing teams appropriately.

### **Team Structures**

The best team structure is simple: a team of teachers who teach the same course or grade level. These teachers have a natural common interest in exploring the critical questions of learning. In some instances, however, a single person may be the only teacher of a grade level or content area (such as in very small schools or courses outside of the core curriculum). How does the only first-grade teacher or the only art teacher in a school become a member of a meaningful collaborative team?

**Vertical teams.** Vertical teams link teachers with those who teach content above and/or below their students. For example, the sole first-grade teacher could become a member of the school's primary team. The members of that team would work together to:

- Clarify the essential outcomes for students in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade
- Develop assessments for the students in each grade level
- Analyze the results of each assessment
- Offer suggestions for improving results



The first and most fundamental task of building a collaborative culture is to bring together those people whose responsibilities create an inherent mutual interest in exploring the critical questions of a PLC.

Each teacher would have the benefit of two “critical friends” who could offer suggestions for improvement as the team examined indicators of student achievement. Furthermore, as teachers examine evidence indicating students are having difficulty in a particular skill in the grade level beyond the one they are teaching, they can make adjustments to their own instruction, pacing, and curriculum.

Vertical teams can also cut across schools. A teacher could join a team that brings the district’s art teachers together on a regular basis to explore critical questions. An elementary school art teacher could work with the middle school teacher to clarify the prerequisite skills students should have acquired as they enter the middle school art program. The K–12 vertical team format can be a powerful tool for strengthening the program of an entire district.

**Electronic teams.** Proximity is not a prerequisite for an effective collaborative team. Teachers can use technology to create powerful partnerships with colleagues across the district, the state, or the world. Several web sites have been created for the expressed purpose of bringing teachers together into electronic teams. Apple Computers offers [www.iSightEd.com](http://www.iSightEd.com), a site that provides educators and professionals with a forum to find each other, share ideas, and ask questions. Microsoft has partnered with the National Staff Development Council to create electronic teams of teachers. Open Text has created a division called “First Class” ([www.firstclass.com](http://www.firstclass.com)) to create electronic partnerships between school districts, schools, and teachers in Canada and the United States. The College Board has created electronic discussion groups for each area of the Advanced Placement program along with sample syllabi, course descriptions, free-response questions, and tips for teaching the AP content. A French teacher in Madison, Wisconsin, can no longer complain he has no opportunity to be a member of a collaborative team when he can meet electronically each week with a teammate in Green Bay. The fact that there is no teammate across the hall does not eliminate the possibility of powerful collaboration.

**Logical links.** Specialist teachers can become members of grade-level or course-specific teams that are pursuing outcomes linked to their areas of expertise. A physical education teacher can join a sixth-grade team in an effort to help students learn percentages. Each day he could help students learn to calculate the percentage of free throws they made in basketball or their batting averages. A music teacher we know joined the fourth-grade team and wrote a musical based on key historical figures students were required to learn that year. A special education teacher joined a biology team because of the difficulties her students were experiencing in that course. She disaggregated the scores of special education students on each test and became a consultant to the team on supplementary materials, instructional strategies, and alternative



## Team Structures

- **Vertical teams** link teachers with those who teach content above or below their students.
- **Electronic teams** use technology to create powerful partnerships with colleagues across the district, the state, or the world.
- **Logical links** put teachers together in teams that are pursuing outcomes linked to their areas of expertise.

assessments to help special education students achieve the intended outcomes of the course.

In short, teachers should be organized into structures that allow them to engage in meaningful collaboration that is beneficial to them and their students. The fundamental question in organizing teams is this: "Do the people on this team have a shared responsibility for responding to the critical questions in ways that enhance the learning of their students?" The effectiveness of any particular team structure will depend on the extent to which it supports teacher dialogue and action aligned with those questions.

## How Can We Find Time for Collaboration?

It is also imperative that teachers be provided with time to meet during their contractual day. We believe it is insincere and disingenuous for any school district or any school principal to stress the importance of collaboration and then fail to provide time for collaboration. One of the ways in which organizations demonstrate their priorities is allocation of resources, and in schools, one of the most precious resources is time.

We also recognize that many districts face real-world constraints in providing time for collaboration. Releasing students from school so that teachers can collaborate may create childcare hardships for some families. Hiring substitute teachers to give teams of teachers time to work together may be cost prohibitive in some districts. Furthermore, teachers and administrators alike are often reluctant to lose precious instructional time so that teachers can meet in teams. Nonetheless, we have worked with school districts throughout North America that have been able to create regularly scheduled weekly time for collaboration within real-world parameters: They bring teachers together during their contractual day while students are on campus, in ways that do not cost money, and that result in little or no loss of instructional time.

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The issue of finding time for collaboration has been addressed effectively—and often—in the professional literature and is readily available for those who are sincerely interested in exploring alternatives. Therefore, the following strategies do not form a comprehensive list; rather, they illustrate some of the steps schools and districts have taken to create the prerequisite time for collaboration.

**Common preparation.** Build the master schedule to provide daily common preparation periods for teachers of the same course or department. Each team should then designate one day each week to engage in collaborative, rather than individual, planning.

**Parallel scheduling.** Schedule common preparation time by assigning the specialists (physical education teachers, librarians, music teachers, art teachers, instructional technologists, guidance counselors, foreign language teachers, and so on) to provide lessons to students across an entire grade level at the same time each day. The team should designate 1 day each week for collaborative planning. Some schools build back-to-back specials classes into the master schedule on each team's designated collaborative day, thus creating an extended block of time for the team to meet.

**Adjusted start and end time.** Gain collaborative time by starting the workday early or extending the workday 1 day each week to gain collaborative team time. In exchange for adding time to the end of 1 workday, teachers get the time back on the other end of that day. For example, on the first day of each school week, the entire staff of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, begins their work day at 7:30 AM rather than the normal 7:45 AM start time. From 7:30 to 8:30 AM, the entire faculty engages in collaborative team meetings. Students begin to arrive at 7:40 AM, as usual, but the start of class is delayed from the normal 8:05 until 8:30 AM. Students are supervised by administrative and non-instructional staff in a variety of optional activities, such as breakfast, library and computer research, open gym, study halls, and tutorials. To make up for the 25 minutes of lost instructional time, 5 minutes is trimmed from five of the eight 50-minute class periods. The school day ends at the usual time (3:25 in the afternoon) and buses run on their regular schedules. Stevenson teachers are free to leave at 3:30 rather than 3:45, the traditional conclusion of their work day. By making these minor adjustments to the schedule on the first day of each week, the entire faculty is guaranteed an hour of collaborative planning to start each week, but their work day or work week has not been extended by a single minute.

**Shared classes.** Combine students across two different grade levels or courses into one class for instruction. While one teacher or team instructs the students, the other team engages in collaborative work. The teams alternate instructing and collaborating to provide equity in learning time for students and teams. Some





schools coordinate shared classes so older students adopt younger students and serve as literacy buddies, tutors, and mentors during shared classes.

**Group activities, events, and testing.** Teams of teachers coordinate activities that require supervision of students rather than instructional expertise, such as watching a DVD or video, conducting resource lessons, reading aloud, attending assemblies, or testing. Nonteaching staff members supervise students while teachers engage in team collaboration.

**Banking time.** Over a designated period of days, extend the instructional minutes beyond the required school day. After you have banked the desired number of minutes, end the instructional day early to allow for faculty collaboration and student enrichment. For example, in a middle school the traditional instructional day ends at 3:00 PM, students board buses at 3:20, and the teachers' contractual day ends at 3:30. The faculty may decide to extend the instructional day until 3:10. By teaching an extra 10 minutes for nine days in a row, they "bank" 90 minutes. On the tenth day, instruction stops at 1:30 and the entire faculty has collaborative team time for 2 hours. The students remain on campus and are engaged in clubs, enrichment activities, assemblies, and so on, sponsored by a variety of parent and community partners and co-supervised by the school's nonteaching staff.

**In-service and faculty meeting time.** Schedule extended time for teams to work together on staff development days and during faculty meeting time. Rather than requiring staff to attend a traditional whole-staff in-service session or sit in a faculty meeting while directives and calendar items are read aloud, shift the focus and use of these days and meetings so members of teams have extended time to learn with and from each other.



Visit the  
National Staff  
Development  
Council's web  
site for more  
ideas on finding  
time to  
collaborate:  
[www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

### Finding Time for Collaboration

- Provide common preparation time.
- Use parallel scheduling.
- Adjust start and end times.
- Share classes.
- Schedule group activities, events, and testing.
- Bank time.
- Use in-service and faculty meeting time wisely.

## How Can We Help Teams Focus on the Issues That Impact Student Learning?

This question gets to the heart of the matter. Once again, merely assigning teachers to groups will not improve a school, and much of what passes for “collaboration” among teachers is more aptly described as “coblaboration,” a term coined by David Perkins (2003). Those who hope to improve student achievement by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community must create and foster the conditions that move educators from mere work groups to high-performing collaborative teams.

What distinguishes a group from a team? We define a team as:

A group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*.

A collection of teachers does not truly become a team until they must rely upon one another (and need one another) to accomplish a goal that none could achieve individually. We will have more to say about the importance of goals in the next chapter.

Professional learning communities do not merely require *teams*—they call for *collaborative* teams. There are many terms in education that have been used so indiscriminately that they have virtually lost their meaning, and “collaboration” is certainly near the top of that list. We have defined collaboration in a PLC as:

A *systematic process* in which educators work together interdependently to analyze and to *impact their professional practice* in order to achieve better results for their students, their team, and their school.

It is only when educators hold themselves accountable to the standard described in this definition that they are truly “co-laboring” in ways that benefit students.

A *systematic process* is a combination of related parts, organized into a whole in a methodical, deliberate, and orderly way, toward a particular aim. It is not intended to be invitational or indiscriminate. Those who develop systematic practices do not hope things happen a certain way; they create specific structures to ensure certain steps are taken.

In a PLC the process of collaboration is specifically designed to *impact* educator practice in ways that lead to better results. Over and over again we have seen schools in which staff members are willing to collaborate about any number of things—dress codes, tardy policies, the appropriateness of Halloween parties—provided they can return to their classrooms and continue to do what they have always done. Yet in a PLC, the reason teachers are organized into

Team

Collaboration

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teams, the reason they are provided with time to work together, the reason they are asked to focus on certain topics and complete specific tasks, is so that when they return to their classrooms they will possess and *utilize* an expanded repertoire of skills, strategies, materials, and ideas in order to impact student achievement in a positive way.

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Principals must do more than assign teachers into teams and hope for the best: They must establish clear parameters and priorities that guide the work of the teams toward the goal of improved student learning. The Critical Issues for Team Consideration worksheet (pages 100–101) is a useful tool toward that end. First, it directs the team's attention to issues that impact practice and, thus, student achievement. Second, it calls upon the team to generate products that flow directly from the dialogue and decisions regarding those issues. One of the most effective ways to enhance the productivity of a team is to insist that it *produce*. In this case, it must produce artifacts related to the team's collective inquiry into the critical questions focused on learning.

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Principal McDonald might have avoided some of the initial confusion regarding how teams were expected to use their time had he presented them with the Critical Issues for Team Consideration worksheet and then worked with the teams to help them establish a timeline for the completion of team products. Imagine if the principal and staff had created the following timeline to guide the dialogue of teams:

By the end of . . .

- The second week of school we will present our team norms.
- The fourth week of school we will present our team SMART goal.
- The sixth week of school we will present our list of the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions our students will acquire during this semester.
- The eighth week of school we will present our first common assessment.
- The tenth week of school we will present our analysis of the results from the common assessments, including areas of strength and strategies for addressing areas of concern.

Excellent!

This kind of documentation of clearly established expectations is a tremendous benefit to teams. They lose no time debating the question, "Why are we here?" or focusing on the trivial because they have been guided toward conversations specifically related to teaching and learning. Furthermore, this process of gathering and reviewing team products on a regular basis is one of the most effective strategies for monitoring the progress of teams. It soon becomes evident when a team is struggling, and support can be provided on a timely basis.

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## Critical Issues for Team Consideration

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

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

Use the following rating scale to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of your team.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Not True of Our Team</b>			<b>Our Team Is Addressing This</b>				<b>True of Our Team</b>		

1. \_\_\_\_\_ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals to improve upon this level of achievement we are working interdependently to attain. (SMART Goals are Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Oriented, and Timebound. SMART Goals are discussed at length in chapter 6.)
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Each member of our team is clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of (1) our course or grade level and (2) each unit within the course or grade level.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ We have aligned the essential learning with state and district standards and the high-stakes assessments required of our students.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ We have identified course content and topics that can be eliminated so we can devote more time to the essential curriculum.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us to determine each student's mastery of essential learning.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.



12. \_\_\_\_ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. \_\_\_\_ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. \_\_\_\_ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. \_\_\_\_ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
16. \_\_\_\_ We have developed or utilized common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. \_\_\_\_ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. \_\_\_\_ We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice each year.





If teachers are to work collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses and grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective.

## The Importance of Explicit Team Norms

A reluctance to change their traditional classroom practices is not the only reason educators tend to drift away from substantive conversations about teaching and learning if parameters are not in place to guide their work. Conversations about the trivial are safer. If teachers are to work collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses and grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective. After all, you were hired for your professional expertise, but what if the results from a common assessment demonstrate that while students taught by your colleagues are successful, your students are not? We have seen evidence that some teachers would prefer not to know their strengths and weaknesses in relationship to their colleagues because it is not worth the risk of being exposed and vulnerable.

In his review of the dysfunctions of a team, Patrick Lencioni (2003) contends that the first and most important step in building a cohesive and high-performing team is the establishment of vulnerability-based trust. Individuals on effective teams learn to acknowledge mistakes, weaknesses, failures, and the need for help. They also learn to recognize and value the strengths of other members of the team and are willing to learn from one another.

The fear of vulnerability leads to the second dysfunction of a team: avoidance of productive conflict. Dysfunctional teams prefer artificial harmony to insightful inquiry and advocacy. As a result, they avoid topics that require them to work interdependently. Even decisions that would appear to require joint effort fail to generate genuine commitment from individuals on the team. Members settle for the appearance of agreement rather than pushing each other to pledge to honor the agreement through their actions. The avoidance of conflict and lack of commitment lead to yet another dysfunction of a team: avoidance of accountability. Team members are unwilling to confront peers who fail to work toward team goals or to honor team decisions. Finally, since members are unwilling to commit to purpose, priorities, and decisions, and are unwilling to hold each other accountable, they inevitably are inattentive to results. When teams demonstrate the five dysfunctions of a team: (1) the inability to establish trust, (2) engage in honest dialogue regarding disagreements, (3) make commitments to one another, (4) hold each other accountable, and (5) focus on results—the team process begins to unravel (Lencioni, 2003).

Leaders can address these dysfunctions in several ways. First, and very importantly, they can model vulnerability, enthusiasm for meaningful exploration of disagreements, articulation of public commitments, willingness to confront those who fail to honor decisions, and an unrelenting focus on and accountability for results. For example, Principal McDonald could acknowledge

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that he made a mistake in his initial approach to creating high-performing teams and admit that he needs the help of the faculty in altering the team process so that it benefits students. He could invite open dialogue about specific proposals to refocus teams on matters impacting learning and help build shared knowledge regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal. He could make commitments to the staff regarding what he is prepared to do to support their efforts and address their concerns. He could demonstrate his commitment to the decisions they reach by confronting those who violate them. Finally, he could clarify the indicators they would monitor as a school to maintain their focus on results.

Furthermore, Principal McDonald could help staff members engage in professional dialogue designed to address the dangers of a dysfunctional team. Teams benefit not only from clarity regarding the purpose of their collaboration, but also from clarity regarding what is expected of each member. Once again, simply putting people in groups does not ensure a productive, positive experience for participants. Most educators can remember a time when they worked in a group that was painfully inefficient and excruciatingly ineffective. But teams increase their likelihood of performing at high levels when they clarify their expectations of one another regarding procedures, responsibilities, and relationships.

All groups establish norms—“ground rules or habits that govern the group” (Goleman, 2002, p. 173)—regardless of whether or not they take the time to reflect upon and articulate the norms they prefer for their team. When individuals work through a process to create explicitly stated norms, and then commit to honor those norms, they increase the likelihood they will begin to function as a collaborative team rather than as a loose collection of people working together.

Here again, members of a learning community will begin the challenging task of creating team norms by *building shared knowledge* regarding best practices and alternative strategies for implementing those practices. For example, one study of high-performing teams (Druskat & Wolf, 2001) found that members consistently demonstrated high emotional intelligence as evidenced by the following characteristics:

- **Perspective taking.** Members are willing to consider matters from the other person’s point of view.
- **Interpersonal understanding.** Members demonstrate accurate understanding of the spoken and unspoken feelings, interests, and concerns of other group members.
- **Willingness to confront.** Members speak up when an individual violates norms, but the confrontation is done in a caring way aimed at building consensus and shared interpretations of commitments.

- **Caring orientation.** Members communicate positive regard, appreciation, and respect. A close personal relationship is not a prerequisite of an effective team, but mutual respect and validation are critical.
- **Team self-evaluation.** The group is willing and able to evaluate its effectiveness.
- **Seeking feedback.** The group solicits feedback and searches for evidence of its effectiveness from external sources as part of a process of continuous improvement.
- **Positive environment.** The group focuses on staying positive: positive affect, positive behavior, and the pursuit of positive outcomes. Members cultivate positive images of the group's past, present, and future.
- **Proactive problem-solving.** Members actively take the initiative to resolve issues that stand in the way of accomplishing team goals.
- **Organizational awareness.** Members understand their connection to and contribution to the larger organization.
- **Building external relationships.** The team establishes relationships with others who can support their efforts to achieve their goals.

Garmston and Wellman (1999, p. 37) identified seven norms of collaboration for teams. They contend that when team members practice the following norms, they promote the productive dialogue essential to effective teams:

1. Pausing
2. Paraphrasing
3. Probing for specificity
4. Putting ideas on the table
5. Paying attention to self and others
6. Presuming positive intentions
7. Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry

In their *Protocols for Effective Advocacy and Protocols for Effective Inquiry* (page 105), Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, (1994, p. 253–258) offer detailed suggestions to assist teams in moving from polite acquiescence to meaningful dialogue that helps clarify the thinking of each member of the group.

The National Staff Development Council devoted an entire issue of their publication *Tools for Schools* (1999) to the topic of team norms. The issue includes a rationale for norms, a format for creating norms, sample team norms, and sources for exploring the topic more fully. (See pages 210–212 in the appendix for a copy of NSDC's Developing Norms document.)





### Protocols for Effective Advocacy

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. State your assumptions.                                     | <i>Here is what I think.</i>  |
| 2. Describe your reasoning.                                    | <i>Here are some reasons why I arrived at this conclusion.</i>                            |
| 3. Give concrete examples.                                     | <i>Let me explain how I saw this work in another school.</i>                              |
| 4. Reveal your perspective.                                    | <i>I acknowledge that I am looking at this from the perspective of a veteran teacher.</i> |
| 5. Anticipate other perspectives.                              | <i>Some teachers are likely to question . . .</i>   |
| 6. Acknowledge areas of uncertainty.                           | <i>Here is one issue you could help me think through.</i>                                 |
| 7. Invite others to question your assumptions and conclusions. | <i>What is your reaction to what I said? In what ways do you see things differently?</i>  |

### Protocols for Effective Inquiry

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Gently probe underlying logic.     | <i>What led you to that conclusion?</i>   |
| 2. Use nonaggressive language.        | <i>Can you help me understand your thinking here?</i>   |
| 3. Draw out their thinking.           | <i>Which aspects of what you have proposed do you feel are most significant or essential?</i> |
| 4. Check for understanding.           | <i>I'm hearing that your primary goal is . . .</i>  |
| 5. Explain your reason for inquiring. | <i>I'm asking about your assumption because I feel . . .</i>                                  |

Good Questions for  
Wave Activity

All of this information should be made available to teams who are called upon to create norms. We also recommend that members of a team have an honest and open dialogue about the expectations they bring to the process by asking each member to reflect upon and discuss his or her past experience with teams. Ask each participant to describe a time when he or she was a member of a group, committee, task force, or so on that proved to be a negative experience. Then ask each participant to explain the specific behaviors or conditions that made it so negative. Next, invite each participant to describe a personal experience in which he or she felt the power and synergy of an effective team. Record the answers and turn the group's attention to identifying norms that would avoid the negative and promote the positive aspects of membership on a team *if* all participants pledged to honor those norms.

We offer the following additional tips for creating norms.

1. **Each team should create its own norms.** Asking a committee to create norms that will be honored by all teams is ineffective. Committees cannot make commitments for us; we have to make them for ourselves. Furthermore, norms should reflect the experiences, hopes, and expectations of the members of a specific team.
2. **Norms should be stated as commitments to act or behave in certain ways rather than as beliefs.** The statement, "We will arrive to meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout the meeting," is more powerful than, "We believe members should be considerate of each other."
3. **Norms should be reviewed at the beginning and end of each meeting for at least 6 months.** Norms only impact the work of a team if they are put into practice over and over again. Teams should not confuse writing norms with living norms.
4. **Teams should formally evaluate their effectiveness at least twice a year.** This assessment should include exploration of the questions:
  - Are we adhering to our norms?
  - Do we need to establish a new norm to address a problem occurring on our team?
  - Are we working interdependently to achieve our team goal?
5. **Teams should focus on a few essential norms rather than creating an extensive laundry list.** Less is more when it comes to norms. People do not need a lot of rules to remember, just a few commitments to honor.
6. **Violations of team norms must be addressed.** Failure to confront clear violations of the commitments members have made to each other will undermine the entire team process.



Team norms are not intended to serve as rules, but rather as commitments: public agreements shared among the members (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Effective teams do not settle for “sorta agreements”; they identify the very specific commitments members have made to each other.

Finally, explicit norms do not ensure each member will observe the agreement, but they do offer a powerful tool for addressing violations, which can then lead to team learning. When done well, norms can help establish the trust, openness, commitment, and accountability that move teams from the trivial to the substantive.

Leaders can and should take each of the purposeful steps presented in this chapter: creating teams on the basis of a common interest in pursuing the critical questions of learning, providing them with time to collaborate, guiding them to the most powerful questions that impact learning, asking teams to create specific products that should flow from their dialogue, and helping them to create norms that facilitate the trust, openness, and commitment essential to effective teams. Those steps can help create the structure for meaningful team dialogue; however, two more critical steps must be taken to help turn the focus of the team to improved student learning:

1. Collaborative teams must develop and pursue SMART goals.
2. Individual teachers and teams must have access to relevant and timely information.

These steps will be considered in the following chapters.

## Part Three Here's Why

Why is it so important to organize a staff into collaborative teams in which people work together interdependently to achieve common goals rather than continuing the long-standing tradition of teacher isolation? The very reason any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) wrote: “Interdependence is what organizations are all about. Productivity, performance, and innovation result from *joint* action, not just individual efforts and behavior” (p. 197). The degree to which people are working together in a coordinated, focused effort is a major determinant of the effectiveness of any organization.

Furthermore, the collaborative team has been cited repeatedly in organizational literature as the most powerful structure for promoting the essential

*“Interdependence is what organizations are all about. Productivity, performance, and innovation result from **joint** action, not just individual efforts and behavior.”*

*(Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 197)*

*Collaborative time can be squandered if educators do not use that time to focus on issues most directly related to teaching and learning.*

*Time On Task  
Argument*

interdependence of an effective enterprise. Experts on effective teams offer very consistent advice regarding collaboration and teams (see “The Power of Teams,” on page 109).

As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, simply organizing people into teams does not improve a school. Steps must be taken to ensure that those team members engage in *collaboration* on the issues that most impact student learning. Educational research has repeatedly linked collaboration with school improvement (see “Linking Collaboration With School Improvement,” page 110). In fact, the case for teachers working together collaboratively is so compelling that we are not aware of any credible research explicitly opposed to the concept.

We have, however, heard individuals oppose providing educators with time to collaborate. They typically frame their objection by arguing the time a teacher spends collaborating with colleagues is time that could have been spent teaching students, and thus represents unproductive time. Once again, research from both organizational development and education refute that position. Effective organizations and effective schools build time for reflection and dialogue into every process. The goal is not merely to do more of what we have always done (regardless of its effectiveness), but to create a culture of continuous improvement, to discover ways to become better at achieving our purpose, forever (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marsh, & William, 2004; Champy, 1995; Collins & Porras, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dolan, 1994; Goldsmith, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Schein, 1996).

Common sense advises, however, that collaborative time can be squandered if educators do not use that time to focus on issues most directly related to teaching and learning. Michael Fullan’s (2001) caution should be self-evident: “Collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67).

Effective leaders will direct the work of teams to the critical questions, because those are the conversations that have the biggest impact on student achievement. Clarifying what students must learn, monitoring the learning of each student, responding to students who need additional time and support for learning, and challenging students who have already mastered the intended outcomes are the most critical tasks in a school. It is imperative, therefore, that educators work together interdependently to become more skillful in these critical areas, and that these questions become the priority within and among collaborative teams. The extensive research base to support the focus on these questions was presented in chapter 3.

It is crucial not to overlook the significance of teams developing explicit norms to guide their work in the process of building the capacity of teachers to



## The Power of Teams

“Empowered teams are such a powerful force of integration and productivity that they form the basic building block of any intelligent organization. Given the right context, teams generate passion and engagement. In addition, a team is something to belong to, a support group and political unit with more clout than the individuals in it.”  
—Pinchot & Pinchot (1993, p. 66)

“We are at a point in time where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done. . . . Working in teams is the norm in a learning organization.”  
—Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith (1994, p. 51)

“The leader of the future will master the art of forming teams. Future leaders will master teamwork, working with and through others because no one person can master all the sources of information to make good decisions.”  
—Ulrich (1996, p. 213)

“Teams bring together complementary skills and experience that exceed those of any individual on the team. Teams are more effective in problem solving. Teams provide a social dimension that enhances work. Teams motivate and foster peer pressure and internal accountability. Teams have more fun.”  
—Katzenbach & Smith (1993, p. 19)

“The best way to achieve challenging goals is through teamwork. Where single individuals may despair of accomplishing a monumental task, teams nurture, support, and inspire each other.”  
—Tichy (1997, p. 143)

“People who collaborate learn from each other and create synergy. That is why learning organizations are made up of teams that share a common purpose. Organizations need togetherness to get things done and to encourage the exploration essential to improvement.”  
—Handy (1995, p. 47)

“Learning organizations are fast, focused, flexible, friendly and fun. To promote these characteristics they are far more likely to be organized into teams than in old-fashioned hierarchies.”  
—Kanter (1995, p. 73)

“We have known for nearly a quarter of a century that self-managed teams are far more productive than any other form of organizing. There is a clear correlation between participation and productivity.”  
—Wheatley (1999, p. 152)

“Collaboration is a social imperative. Without it people can't get extraordinary things done in organizations.”  
—Kouzes & Posner (2003, p. 20)

## Linking Collaboration With School Improvement

- Gordon Cawelti: “The New Effective Schools” in *Best Practices, Best Thinking and Emerging Issues in School Leadership*
- Linda Darling-Hammond: *The Right to Learn*
- Kenneth Eastwood and Karen Seashore Louis: “Restructuring That Lasts”
- Michael Fullan: *Change Forces*
- Steve Klein, E. Medrich, and V. Perez-Ferreiro: *Fitting the Pieces: Education Reform That Works*
- Robert Marzano: *What Works in Schools*
- Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert: *Professional Learning Communities and the Work of High School Teaching*
- The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future: *No Dream Denied*
- The National Education Association: “The Keys Initiative”
- Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage: *Successful School Restructuring*
- Doug Reeves: *The Leader’s Guide to Standards*
- Richard Sagor: “Collaborative Action Research for Educational Change” in *Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind*.
- Jonathon Saphier: *John Adams’ Promise*
- Mike Schmoker: *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*
- Karen Seashore Louis, Sharon Kruse, and Helen Marks: “School-wide Professional Community” in *Authentic Achievement*
- Southern Regional Education Board: *Things That Matter Most in Improving Student Learning*
- Judith Warren Little: “The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers’ Professional Relations”



work together collaboratively. Norms can help clarify expectations, promote open dialogue, and serve as a powerful tool for holding members accountable. As one study of high-performing teams concluded:

When self-management norms are explicit and practiced over time, team effectiveness improves dramatically, as does the experience of team members themselves. Being on the team becomes rewarding in itself—and those positive emotions provide energy and motivation for accomplishing the team's goals. (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 182)

Another review of the research on high-performing teams concluded that explicit team norms helped to increase the emotional intelligence of the group by cultivating trust, a sense of group identify, and belief in group efficacy (Druskat & Wolf, 2001). Finally, norms can be a powerful tool at that inevitable moment when someone on the team fails to honor a norm. Referring back to the norms can help “the members of a group to ‘re-member,’ to once again take out membership in what the group values and stands for; to ‘remember,’ to bring the group back into one cooperating whole” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 194).

## 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 112). 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 113, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.

# The Professional Learning Community Continuum

Element of a PLC	Pre-Initiation Stage	Initiation Stage	Developing Stage	Sustaining Stage
<p><b>Collaborative Teams of Teachers Focus on Issues That Directly Impact Student Learning</b></p>	<p>There is no systematic plan in place to assign staff members to teams or provide them with time to collaborate. Teachers work in isolation with little awareness of the strategies, methods, or materials used by their colleagues.</p>	<p>Some structures have been put into place for teachers who may be interested in collaborating. Teachers are encouraged but not required to participate. Topics tend to focus on matters other than classroom instruction and student learning.</p>	<p>Time has been provided during the contractual day for teachers to work together in teams on a regular basis (at least once a week). Guidelines have been established in an effort to ensure staff members use collaborative time to address topics that will impact instruction. Teams are attempting to develop positive relationships and implement specific procedures, but they may not be convinced the collaborative team process is beneficial. Leaders of the school are seeking ways to monitor the effectiveness of the teams.</p>	<p>Self-directed teams represent the primary engine of continuous improvement in the school. Team members are skillful in advocacy and inquiry, hold each other accountable for honoring the commitments they have made to one another, consistently focus on the issues that are most significant in improving student achievement, and set specific measurable goals to monitor improvement. The collaborative team process serves as a powerful form of job-embedded staff development, helping both individual members and the team in general become more effective in helping students learn at high levels. Staff members consider their collaborative culture vital to the effectiveness of their school.</p>





# Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet

## A Commitment to a Collaborative Culture

Describe one or more aspects of a professional learning community that you would like to see in place in your school.	What steps or activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each step or phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Teachers work together as members of collaborative teams. The members of each team work interdependently to achieve common goals.</p> <p>Each team is provided with time to meet and uses that time to engage in collective inquiry on questions specifically linked to gains in student achievement.</p> <p>Each team adopts and observes protocols that clarify how members will fulfill their responsibilities to the team.</p> <p>Each team is asked to generate and submit products, which result from their discussion of critical questions.</p>				



## Part Five

### Tips for Moving Forward: Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams

- 1** Ensure that teams are created on the basis of shared responsibility for pursuing the critical questions of teaching and learning with a particular group of students: for example, by course or by grade level.
- 2** Work with staff to find creative ways to provide more time for team collaboration, including ways of using existing time more effectively.
- 3** Disperse leadership more widely by identifying team leaders for any team with more than three people. Meet with team leaders on a regular basis to identify problematic areas of the process and develop strategies for resolving those problems.
- 4** Ask teams to build shared knowledge—to learn together—as they approach each new task in the collaborative process.
- 5** Provide teams with tools such as supporting research, templates, exemplars, worksheets, and timelines to assist them in each step of the process.
- 6** Monitor the work of each team through ongoing assessment of their products, regular meetings with team leaders, and formal self-evaluations. Respond immediately to a team that is having difficulty.
- 7** Building-level leadership teams should model everything being asked of the collaborative teams, including meeting on a regular basis, staying focused on issues with the greatest impact on student achievement, establishing and honoring norms, and working toward SMART goals.
- 8** Create procedures to ensure teams are able to learn from one another.
- 9** Look for ways to link teams with relevant resources inside and outside of your building (including other teams).
- 10** Make teams the focus of recognition and celebration (see chapter 2). Take every opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of teams.



## Part Six Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

### To Promote a Collaborative Culture in Your School or District, Ask:

1. Have we organized our staff into collaborative teams?

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2. Have teams been organized on the basis of common courses and common grade levels whenever possible?

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3. If we have used the interdisciplinary team structure, have members of the team identified specific, overarching student-achievement goals, and do they use those goals to guide their work?

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4. Have specialist teachers and singleton teachers found meaningful collaborative teams?

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5. Have we avoided assigning people to teams whose disparate assignments make it difficult if not impossible to focus on the critical questions of learning?

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6. Have we provided time for teachers to meet in their collaborative teams on a regular basis?

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7. Do teams focus on the critical questions of learning identified in this book?

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8. Are teams asked to submit specific products according to a designated timeline? Do these products reflect their focus on the critical questions?

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9. What systems are in place to monitor the work and the effectiveness of the teams on a timely basis?

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10. Has every team developed explicit norms that clarify the commitments members have made to one another regarding how they will work together as a team?

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11. Do teams honor the norms they have established? What happens when faculty members do not honor their commitments?

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12. Have we given teams the knowledge base, time, and support essential for their effectiveness?

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### Final Thoughts



A collaborative culture does not simply emerge in a school or district: Leaders cultivate collaborative cultures when they develop the capacity of their staffs to work as members of high-performing teams. People throughout the organization, however, must always remember that collaboration is a means to an end—to higher levels of learning—rather than the end itself. Chapter 6 addresses the challenge of creating a results orientation that impacts the work of teams, the school, and the district.

