Chapter 8

Consensus and Conflict in a Professional Learning Community

Part One
The Case Study: Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance

Members of a professional learning community view conflict as a source of creative energy and an opportunity for building shared knowledge. They create specific strategies for exploring one another's thinking, and they make a conscious effort to understand as well as to be understood.

David C. Roth, the principal of Van Halen High School, was annoyed. He knew how hard he had worked to build consensus for moving forward with professional learning community concepts. He provided the entire staff with research and readings on the benefits of PLCs. He sent key teacher leaders to conferences on PLCs and used those staff members as a guiding coalition to promote the concept. He encouraged interested staff to visit schools that were working as PLCs. He met with the entire faculty in small groups to listen to their concerns and answer their questions. Finally, at the end of this painstaking process, he was convinced the faculty was ready to move forward. He assigned teachers into subject area teams and asked each team to work collaboratively to clarify the essential outcomes of their courses and to develop common assessments to monitor student proficiency.

Within a month, the Sophomore English Team met with Principal Roth to ask if the team could exempt one of its members from meetings. They explained that Fred made it evident he was opposed to the entire idea of collaborative teams and common assessments. Fred made no effort to contribute and his ridicule and sarcasm were undermining the team. Principal Roth assured them he would look into the situation and attempt to remedy it.

The next day Principal Roth called Fred to his office to discuss Fred's attitude toward his colleagues and the collaborative team process. After listening to the principal's concerns, Fred expressed his unhappiness with the heavy-handed,

top-down dictate of working in teams. He rejected the idea that the staff had arrived at consensus. Not only was he opposed to the initiative, he knew many other teachers who were as well. It was fine with him if the team did not want him to participate, because he had no interest in participating. He had always been an effective teacher, and he did not need some artificial process of working with colleagues to become effective.

Principal Roth resented Fred's characterization of the decision-making process and his assertion that the staff had never arrived at consensus. As he expressed that resentment, it was evident that the emotions of both men were becoming more heated. Principal Roth decided the prudent course would be to adjourn the meeting.

Throughout the day the principal struggled with his dilemma. On the one hand, he was not amenable to exempting Fred from the PLC process. He was wary of establishing a precedent that released overt resisters from the obligation to contribute to their collaborative teams. He was concerned that others on the staff would resent devoting time and energy to collaboration if their colleagues were able to opt out of the process. On the other hand, he knew Fred could be difficult and he considered it unlikely that Fred could be persuaded to change his attitude.

After much deliberation, Principal Roth decided to ask the English team to continue working with Fred in the hope that his attitude would improve over time. The team was unhappy with his response.

Reflection

Consider Principal Roth's efforts to build consensus for an improvement process and his approach to dealing with a staff member who was unwilling to support the process. What is your reaction? Can you identify alternative strategies the principal might have used that would have been more effective?

Part Two
Here's How

In chapter 2, we offered suggestions for developing consensus: Create a guiding coalition, build shared knowledge, and engage in dialogue with staff members in small groups to listen to and address concerns. Principal Roth was attentive to each of these suggestions, yet he still encountered difficulties. The problem arose, in part, because no clear, operational definition of consensus

guided the decision-making process in the school. Principal Roth was certain the staff supported moving forward with the PLC concept, while Fred was equally convinced that staff members opposed the concept. Without a shared understanding, people were left to determine their own standard for consensus.

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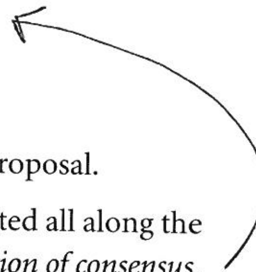
Have We Arrived at Consensus on Consensus?

In our work with schools, we frequently ask a straightforward question: "How do you define 'consensus' when your staff considers a proposal?" The responses we hear vary greatly. We have established a continuum of consensus based on the typical responses. Consider the following continuum and select the point at which you feel you have reached agreement on a proposal in your own school.

We have arrived at consensus in our school when:

1. All of us can embrace the proposal.
2. All of us can endorse the proposal.
3. All of us can live with the proposal.
4. All of us can agree not to sabotage the proposal.
5. We have a majority—at least 51%—in support of the proposal.



The most common outcome of this survey is a staff distributed all along the continuum because members *do not have consensus on the definition of consensus.* Disagreements and allegations are inevitable when a faculty does not understand the standard that must be met in order to make a collective decision.

Actually, we advise staffs to reject all points on the 5-point continuum. In our view (a view not universally shared by others), it is difficult to maintain that you have the consent of the group to move forward with a simple majority—a standard that can disregard the perspective of 49% of the group. On the other hand, every other point on the continuum goes beyond consensus when it calls for "all of us" to reach a level of agreement. While it is wonderful to strive for unanimity, there is a difference between unanimity and consensus. In the real world of schools, if *all of us* must agree before we can act, if every member of the staff can veto taking action, we will be subjected to constant inaction, a state of perpetual status quo.

The definition of consensus we prefer establishes two simple standards that must be met in order to move forward when a decision is made by consensus. A group has arrived at consensus when:

1. All points of view have been heard.
2. The will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.

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This definition can, and typically does, result in moving forward with a proposal despite the fact that some members of the organization are against it.

If this standard had been applied in the case study, Principal Roth and his guiding coalition would have certainly built shared knowledge and engaged in small group dialogues to address concerns. At some point, however, they would have also presented a specific proposal such as this:

> In order to create a guaranteed and viable curriculum, establish consistency in assessing student proficiency, and promote a collaborative culture, we will work together in collaborative teams that clarify essential learning by course, create common formative assessments, and analyze the results from those assessments to improve student achievement.

Process

The staff would then be randomly divided into two groups. The first group would be asked to work together to create a comprehensive list of all the reasons the faculty should oppose the proposal. The second group would be called upon to create a comprehensive list of all the reasons the staff should support the proposal. At this point, personal feelings about the proposal do not to come into play. Each member of the staff is to engage in an intellectual exercise to list all the possible pros and cons regarding the specific idea under consideration.

In the next step of the process, the first group presents all the reasons they listed to oppose the suggestion. Members of the second group are asked to listen attentively until the opposed group has completed their list, and then they are invited to add to that list with other objections that might not have been identified. The process is then repeated with the proponent group announcing their comprehensive list in support of the decision, with the objectors then being invited to add to it. Participants are then encouraged to ask for clarification on any point they do not understand. If done correctly, no one will know where any member of the staff stands on the issue personally, although all points of view have been heard.

The next step is to determine the will of the group. A quick and simple way to do so is to use the "fist to five" strategy. Once everyone is clear on the proposal and all pros and cons have been offered, each person is asked to indicate a level of support as shown in the feature box on page 167.

? Introverts

The facilitator for the process ensures that everyone understands the issue under consideration and how to express themselves through fist to five. All members of the staff are then asked to express their position simultaneously by raising their hands with the appropriate indication of support (that is, the number of fingers best expressing their level of support). Each participant is then able to look around the room to ascertain the support for the proposal. If participants

Fist to Five Strategy

5 Fingers:	I love this proposal. I will champion it.
4 Fingers:	I strongly agree with the proposal.
3 Fingers:	The proposal is okay with me. I am willing to go along.
2 Fingers:	I have reservations and am not yet ready to support this proposal.
1 Finger:	I am opposed to this proposal.
Fist:	If I were king or queen, I would veto this proposal, regardless of the will of the group.

do not support the proposal, or the vote is too close to determine the will of the group at a glance, the proposal does not go forward. Pilot projects may be run, more time can be taken to build shared knowledge, and in time the proposal may be presented again; however, if support is not readily apparent, the standard of consensus has not been met. If, however, it is evident by looking around the room that it is the will of the group to move forward (the number of hands with 3, 4, and 5 fingers clearly outnumber those with 2, 1, and fists), consensus has been reached and all staff members will be expected to honor the decision.

There are certainly variations on this format. For example, if the technology is available, staff could vote anonymously and have the tally reported instantly. If there are concerns about intimidation, an anonymous paper vote may be necessary as long as the process for counting the votes is accepted as fair by all concerned. In very large schools, the vote may take place in a series of small-group staff meetings rather than one large-group meeting. In that case, it is prudent to have the teachers' association appoint a representative to attend all of the meetings in case concerns emerge about the accuracy of the reporting. But while the format may vary, one thing does not: Decision-making is easier, more effective, and less likely to end in disputes about process when a staff has a clear operational definition of consensus.

The Need to Confront

A faculty that has built a solid foundation for a PLC by carefully crafting consensus regarding their purpose, the school they seek to create, their collective commitments, the specific goals they will use to monitor their progress, and the strategies for achieving those goals, has not eliminated the possibility of conflict. The real strength of a PLC is determined by the response to the disagreements and violations of commitments that inevitably occur.

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Every organization will experience conflict, particularly when the organization is engaged in significant change. Every collective endeavor will include instances when people fail to honor agreed-upon priorities and collective commitments. The ultimate goal, of course, is to create a culture that is so strong and so open that members throughout the organization will use the violation as an opportunity to reinforce what is valued by bringing peer pressure to bear on the offender, saying, in effect, "That is not how we do it here." In the interim, however, it typically will be the responsibility of the leader (that is, principal or administrator) to communicate what is important and valued by demonstrating a willingness to confront when appropriate. Nothing will destroy the credibility of a leader faster than an unwillingness to address an obvious violation of what the organization contends is vital. A leader must not remain silent; he or she must not be unwilling to act when people disregard the purpose and priorities of the organization.

Confrontation does not, however, involve screaming, demeaning, or vilifying. It is possible to be tough-minded and adamant about protecting purpose and priorities while also being tender with people. One of the most helpful resources we have found for engaging in frank dialogue when "the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong" is *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler (2002, p. 3). They contend that skillful communicators reject the false dichotomy of the "Suckers Choice": I can either be honest and hurtful *or* be kind and withhold the truth. Instead, they search for the "Genius of And"—a way to be both honest *and* respectful, to say what needs to be said to the people who need to hear it without brutalizing them or causing undue offense.

Some of the strategies offered in *Crucial Conversations* for engaging in honest and respectful dialogue include:

1. Clarify what you want and what you do not want to result from the conversation.
2. Attempt to find mutual purpose.
3. Create a safe environment for honest dialogue.
4. Use facts because "gathering facts is the homework required for crucial conversations" (p. 127).
5. Share your thought process that has led to the conversation.
6. Encourage recipients to share their facts and thought process.

Let us apply these strategies to the situation Principal Roth is facing. Prior to initiating the conversation with Fred, Principal Roth might clarify his position in his own mind: "I want all students to have the benefit of a teacher who

is a member of a high-performing collaborative team. Therefore, I want Fred to honor the commitments we made as a staff to the collaborative process by making a positive contribution to his team. I do not want Fred to think we are questioning his expertise or diminishing his contribution to the school." Principal Roth would then think of how he might achieve what he wants and avoid what he does not want through a meaningful, respectful dialogue with Fred.

During the conversation with Fred, the principal could attempt to find mutual purpose: "I believe we both want a school that is committed to helping all students achieve at high levels and to providing teachers with a satisfying and fulfilling professional experience." He could ask Fred if he agrees with that assessment of their mutual purpose.

Roth could attempt to create a safe environment for dialogue by sharing facts, speaking tentatively, inviting Fred to clarify any mistakes in his thinking, and encouraging the teacher to elaborate on his own thought process: "I feel very strongly that developing our capacity to work together collaboratively on significant issues centered in teaching and learning is vital to both raising student achievement and creating a rewarding workplace. Our staff has made commitments to work together with the colleagues on their teams, and I was wondering if that commitment is problematic for you. Here are some of the events that caused me to raise this question. I understand you frequently do not attend the meetings of your collaborative team, and that you have not made any contribution to creating common assessments. I received several complaints from students and parents that you had not taught the skills assessed on the last common test. I recognize the contribution you have made to this school over the years, and I don't want to diminish that contribution in any way. In fact, I think your teammates could benefit from your experience. So help me understand. Are my facts incorrect? Are there issues of which I am unaware? I'm very interested in hearing your perspective and your assessment of any factors that may be impacting your contribution to your collaborative team."

At this point it is important for Principal Roth to listen carefully to Fred, to make a good faith effort to understand Fred's perspective. In *Difficult Conversations*, another helpful study of how to address differences through dialogue, the authors advise, "Listening is not only the skill that lets you into the other person's world; it is the single most powerful move you can make to keep the conversation constructive" (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler, 2000, p. 202).

If Fred agrees with the mutual purpose but cites conditions that are impeding his ability to contribute to the team, the principal and Fred can brainstorm solutions and commit to carry out their agreed-upon plan. If Fred can express his reasons for resisting the proposal, the principal may be able to modify the context of the proposal in a way that resonates with Fred. For example, we know

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(Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2000, p. 202)

of a teacher who argued he should not be required to work with his team because he was only 2 years from retirement and was already getting the best results in his department. The principal acknowledged those points and complimented the teacher on the craft knowledge he had developed over the years. The principal then pointed out that all that accumulated knowledge would walk out the door with him on his retirement day unless he shared it with his colleagues. By shifting the focus from "participate to improve" to "participate to ensure your ongoing legacy," the principal convinced the teacher to commit to contribute to his team.

It is possible, however, that Fred rejects the mutual purpose. He might say: "My primary job is to give students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have learned what I taught, and I don't need to collaborate with peers to do my job. I see your insistence on collaboration as an attempt to deprive me of my autonomy. As a professional I have a right to determine what I will teach, the instructional strategies I deem appropriate, and how I will assess my students. If others elect to collaborate, it is their choice, but I choose not to participate."

In this situation, Principal Roth should:

1. Continue to work with Fred in a respectful and professional manner. Losing his composure or arguing with Fred serves no one's interest.
2. Acknowledge that there are fundamental differences in their perspectives; however, those differences do not exempt Fred from participating in the collaborative process in a productive way. Principal Roth must send a clear message to Fred that the need for change is immediate and imperative.
3. Clarify the specific behaviors he requires of Fred. Admonitions such as, "You need to do a better job with your team," or, "You need to improve your attitude toward collaboration" do not provide Fred with the precise direction that is needed. A far more effective strategy might sound like this: "Fred, there are three things I need you to begin doing immediately. First, you *must* attend all of your team meetings. Second, you *must* honor each of the norms your team has established regarding how members will fulfill their responsibilities and relate to one another. Third, you *must* provide me with specific evidence each week that you are (1) teaching your students the essential learning outcomes established by your team and (2) preparing your students to demonstrate their attainment of those outcomes on the common assessments created by the team. We can discuss different ways you might provide me with such evidence. To ensure that there are no misunderstandings, I will provide you with a written directive detailing these expectations."

> *"Successful groups know how to fight gracefully—they embrace the positive aspects of conflict and actively minimize the negative aspects. . . . Conflict is an important resource for forging better practices." (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p. 183)*

4. Invite Fred to offer any suggestions, support, training, or resources he might need to comply with the directive.
5. Clarify the specific consequences that will occur if Fred ignores the directive he has been given: "Fred, if you disregard what I have directed you to do, I will have no choice but to consider your actions as insubordination. At that point I will suspend you without pay and take the matter to the Board of Education."
6. Establish strategies to monitor Fred's behavior rather than his attitude. When good-faith efforts to engage in meaningful dialogue reveal fundamental differences rather than common ground, and when attempts to participate in crucial conversations lead to impasse rather than agreement, attempts to "talk" a person into a new attitude are almost always unproductive.
7. Acknowledge and celebrate any efforts Fred may make to change his behavior.
8. Apply the specified consequences if necessary.

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Leaders are always in a better position to confront when they act as the promoters and protectors of decisions, agreements, and commitments of the group. Appeals to hierarchy—"Do it because I am the boss and I said so"—may eventually become necessary on occasion, but in raising an issue initially, leaders are more effective utilizing the moral authority that comes with defending the articulated collective aspirations of the people within the organization.

Part Three
Here's Why

As we emphasized in chapter 2, research has consistently concluded that effective leaders build shared vision and a shared sense of purpose that binds people together. But unless vision and purpose result in action, nothing is accomplished (Decrane, 1996; Klein, Medrich, & Perez-Ferreiro, 1996; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Ulrich, 1996). So what are leaders to do when some members of the organization are opposed to taking action that is critical to moving forward? The best leaders will create a "critical mass" of those willing to act (Klein, Medrich, & Perez-Ferreiro, 1996) and will then move to action without expecting universal support (Evans, 1996; Burns, 1978).

Conflict is an inevitable by-product of the substantive change processes in schools (Evans, 1996; Lieberman, 1995; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). As James Champy (1995) wrote: "A culture that squashes disagreement is a culture doomed

to stagnate, because change always begins with disagreement. Besides, disagreement can never be squashed entirely. It gets repressed, only to emerge later as a sense of injustice, followed by apathy, resentment, and even sabotage" (p. 89).

In fact, the absence of conflict suggests the changes are only superficial ✓ because "*conflict* is *essential* to any successful change effort" (Fullan, 1993, p. 27). Therefore, those who hope to lead the effort effectively must learn how to manage conflict productively rather than focusing on how to kill it or avoid it (Newmann & Wehlage, 1996). Effective leaders will surface the conflict, draw out and acknowledge the varying perspectives, and search for a common ground that everyone can endorse (Goleman, 2002). When managed well, conflict can serve as an engine of creativity and energy (Saphier, 2005), build shared knowledge (Maxwell, 1995), clarify priorities (Bossidy & Charan, 2002), and develop stronger teams (Lencioni, 2005).

Repeated conflict over the same issues can certainly represent a drain on an organization's time and energy, and at some point there is a need for closure. But when educational leaders at the district or school level avoid confrontation because they favor keeping the peace over productive conflict, they can do tremendous damage to any improvement process. As we wrote in *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998):

> The school suffers when individuals are free to act in a manner the staff as a whole has agreed is contrary to the school's best interest. The principal suffers because his or her credibility as a leader is diminished by an unwillingness to confront an obvious problem. The individual acting inappropriately suffers because he or she has been deprived of an opportunity for learning and growth. Most important, the improvement initiative suffers because the staff will soon come to recognize that the principal assigns a higher priority to avoiding conflict than to advancing the vision and values of the school. (p. 113)

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How Are Attitudes Changed?

The most frequent issue raised by participants in our workshops is help in dealing with "resisters." Teachers and administrators alike want to know how to change the minds of those who persist in their opposition to an agreed-upon initiative. Gladwell (2002) contends there is a tendency to overestimate the importance of character (for example, "June is just a negative person") and underestimate the power of context: the cultural norms and peer pressure that influence behavior. We concur and join the legion of educational writers (Barth, 2001; Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Newmann & Associates, 1996; Sarason, 1996; Schlechty, 1997) who have urged leaders to move beyond structural changes and

to address culture as a critical part of the improvement process. Focusing on changing the culture is one of the most powerful strategies for converting people to the cause of improvement, because most people are powerfully influenced by the culture in which they work.

But changing culture is a long-term process. What short-term strategies are available to persuade reluctant staff members to join the improvement initiative? Howard Gardner (2004) has identified seven factors that can be used to bring about changes in people's thinking. The first six of those strategies include:

1. **Reason:** Appealing to rational thinking and decision-making.
2. **Research:** Building shared knowledge of the research base supporting a position.
3. **Resonance:** Connecting to the person's intuition so that the proposal "feels right."
4. **Representational Re-descriptions:** Changing the way the information is presented (for example, using stories or analogies instead of data).
5. **Resources and Reward:** Providing people with incentives to embrace an idea.
6. **Real-World Events:** Presenting real-world examples where the idea has been applied successfully.

Gardner believes that the greatest likelihood of changing the thinking of others occurs when these six factors work in consort, but he acknowledges that even if each has been addressed, resistance is still likely to occur. He advises that *resistance must be identified and dealt with rather than ignored, and that direct confrontation of resistance is an important seventh factor in changing someone's mind.*

Howard Gardner's Factors to Change People's Thinking (2004)

1. Reason
2. Research
3. Resonance
4. Representational Re-descriptions
5. Resources and Reward
6. Real-World Events
7. Confrontation

Don't focus on the attitude; focus on the behavior.

But what is an effective way to confront resistance? We are often asked for advice on what to say to convert those with "bad attitudes"—those who remain opposed to moving forward despite every effort to convince them to support an initiative. Our advice is simple: Don't focus on the attitude—focus on the behavior. Research in the fields of psychology, organizational development, and education concur that changes in attitudes follow, rather than precede, changes in behavior. When work is designed to require people to *act* in new ways, the possibility of new experiences are created for them. These new experiences, in turn, can lead to new attitudes over time (Champy, 1995; Kotter, 1996; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Reeves, 2002; Wheelis, 1973).

In the final analysis, however, it is important to recognize that it is quite probable some people will *never* embrace PLC concepts despite overwhelming evidence of the benefits and the best efforts of leaders to bring them on board. Teachers who believe it is their job to teach and the students' job to learn, who are convinced that learning is a function of the aptitude of the student rather than the expertise of the teacher, who define professionalism as the autonomy to do as they please, or who take pleasure in wallowing in negativity will always find a way to dismiss PLC concepts.

So what is a leader to do when she continues to meet with defiance even though she has listened respectfully, made a good faith effort to find common ground, exhausted every art of persuasion, and prescribed the specific behaviors she expects an individual staff member to demonstrate despite his or her reservations or concerns? The traditional school response is to avoid the problem (Evans, 1996; Sarason, 1996). Leaders must overcome this tradition if they want to avoid stalling their improvement efforts.

Many leaders conclude, perhaps rightly, that there is very little hope of changing the hard-core resisters, and so they begin to ignore their repeated disregard for and violations of the agreed-upon commitments to implement the improvement agenda. Leaders must persist, nevertheless, and follow through on the specific consequences they have outlined to those who violate the collective commitments. *They must keep in mind that the goal in addressing these violations is not only to bring about change in the resister, but also to communicate priorities throughout the organization.* Unwillingness to follow through sends mixed messages about what is important and valued. As Evans (2001) concluded, the need to confront resistance is "one of the toughest truths of change in school" (p. 276) because "confrontation forms a matching bookend with clarity and focus" (p. 288). In every school that we have seen succeed as a PLC, a defining moment has occurred when a leader chose to confront rather than avoid saboteurs. We are convinced their schools' improvement efforts could not have gone forward had they ignored violations of collective commitments.

We know that many veteran administrators will dismiss this advice to confront resisters as out of touch with the realities of schooling. They could point to the difficulties they face when it comes to dismissing a tenured teacher, and in that respect, they would be right. For example, in 1985, Illinois passed reform legislation intended to make it easier to dismiss teachers for incompetence. A recent study of the impact of the legislation found, on average, only 2 of the 95,000 teachers in the state are dismissed for incompetence each year. The study also found that the cost of bringing a tenured teacher through the laborious and time-consuming process for dismissal averaged $100,000 ("Protecting Mediocre Teachers," 2005).

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In his study of effective organizations, Collins (2001) found they not only were committed to getting "the right people on the bus," but they were equally attentive to getting "the wrong people off the bus" (p. 41). Educators often reply that this advice does not apply in their settings because of the difficulty of removing staff. We are convinced, however, that Collins' finding has merit, even when confronting veteran staff members who enjoy the protection of tenure. Although it may be difficult to remove saboteurs from the bus in education, we can take steps to ensure that they are not in the driver's seat. We can change their seats and reduce their relevance in the decisions regarding the route we will take.

Bus Analogy

We know of a high school principal who inherited a leadership structure that included a chairperson of each department. Seniority was king in the school. New teachers were assigned to classes perceived as least desirable and chairmanships were awarded as a matter of right to the most veteran staff member in the department. The principal soon discovered that the department chairs considered themselves the champions of the status quo (primarily because the quo gave them a certain degree of status). They were adamantly opposed to any proposal for even the smallest of changes in the practices of the school. Their negativity routinely tainted any attempts to engage the staff in dialogue through department meetings. When the principal met with each chair to express his concerns about the role they were playing in thwarting any consideration of steps that could be taken to improve the school, he found that behind the scenes they had cemented their alliance and were uniformly opposed to exploring improvement strategies.

Rather than waiting to improve the school "one retirement at a time," the principal set out to reduce the relevance of the department chairs. He created a school improvement task force and recruited some of the most highly respected members of the faculty to serve on it. He created schedules to ensure members of the task force were available to meet with him on a regular basis, and he began communicating with department chairs through memos rather than meetings. As the task force went through the process of building shared knowledge and

soliciting the concerns of the staff, the principal conducted small-group interdisciplinary dialogues rather than meeting with the entire faculty or single departments. As the task force built support for some changes, new project teams were created to address specific elements of the improvement plan, and interested staff members were recruited to serve on each project team. As more staff members became involved in the process, more people became invested in the improvement effort. Leadership was widely dispersed. In short, the principal broke free from the traditional bureaucracy and utilized a new structure of ad hoc task forces and project teams, a structure described as "*the* most powerful tool we have for effecting change" (Waterman, 1993, p. 16). Department chairs remained on the bus, but they were no longer driving.

Another concern that can arise when confronting resisters is the human tendency to want positive relationships, particularly with our working colleagues. The good news is that "the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve" (Fullan, 2001, p. 5). The bad news is that conflict is an inevitable by-product of those initiatives, and there will be strains on relationships during the process. It is not uncommon for leaders to be vilified at the outset, despite every effort they may have taken to build consensus and to listen to and honor those who opposed the change. Even if the will of the group to go forward is evident, adamant resisters may disparage the leader and the strategies used to arrive at consensus. They may say, "She manipulated the process. People are really opposed but were intimidated because they knew she wanted to do it. The dialogue was a farce. She dismissed counter arguments without considering them. She is just attempting to use us to make a name for herself so she can climb the administrative ladder."

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning book on leadership, James McGregor Burns (1978) offered advice to those faced with this dilemma: "No matter how strong the yearning for unanimity . . . [leaders] must settle for far less than universal affection. . . . They must accept conflict. They must be willing and able to be unloved" (p. 34). The recognition that they will not be universally loved despite their best efforts may trouble leaders initially; however, once they come to accept that truth, it can be quite liberating.

We have seen schools and districts held hostage by a few recalcitrant staff members who veto any attempt to move forward, but that situation can only occur when leaders allow it. As Jonathon Saphier (2005) wrote, "Day after day in schools across America, change initiatives, instructional improvement, and better results for children are blocked, sabotaged, or killed through silence and inaction . . . this lack of follow-through results from the avoidance or inability to face conflict openly and make it a creative source of energy among educators" (p. 37).

English philosopher Edmund Burke once observed, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." In no way do we mean to suggest that those unwilling to consider more effective ways to meet the needs of students are evil. Often they are good people who have been burned too many times by initiatives launched with enthusiasm only to be quickly abandoned. We do, however, think a paraphrase of Burke is appropriate: All that is necessary for the triumph of those who resist school improvement is for educational leaders to do nothing.

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Leaders who face a scenario similar to the one described in this chapter must be unequivocal in confronting the problem and demanding change. Daniel Goleman is an ardent advocate of the importance of emotional intelligence, a concept anchored, in part, in the critical significance of skillful relationship building characterized by high levels of empathy for others. Yet even Goleman (1998) advises:

> Persuasion, consensus building, and all the other arts of influence don't always do the job. Sometimes it simply comes down to using the power of one's position to get people to act. A common failing of leaders from supervisors to top executives is the failure to be *emphatically assertive* [italics added] when necessary. (p. 190)

Part Four
Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

The PLC Continuum

Working individually and quietly, review the following continuum of a school's progress on the PLC journey (page 178). 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 179, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.

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The Professional Learning Community Continuum

Element of a PLC	Pre-Initiation Stage	Initiation Stage	Developing Stage	Sustaining Stage
Responding to Conflict in a PLC	People react to conflict with classic flight or fight responses. Most staff members withdraw from interactions in order to avoid those they find disagreeable. Others are perpetually at war in acrimonious, unproductive arguments that never seem to get resolved. People seem more interested in winning arguments than in resolving differences. Groups tend to regard each other as adversaries.	School and district leaders take steps to resolve conflict as quickly as possible. Addressing conflict is viewed as an administrative responsibility. The primary objective of administrators in addressing disputes is to restore the peace.	Staff members have created norms or protocols to help them identify and address the underlying issues causing conflict. Members are encouraged to explore their positions and the fundamental assumptions that have led them to their positions. They attempt to use a few key, guiding principles to assist them in coming to closure.	Staff members view conflict as a source of creative energy and an opportunity for building shared knowledge. They create specific strategies for exploring one another's thinking, and they make a conscious effort to understand as well as to be understood. They seek ways to test competing assumptions through action research and are willing to re-think their position when research, data, and information contradict their suppositions. Because they have found common ground on their purpose and priorities, they are able to approach disagreements with high levels of trust and an assumption of good intentions on the part of all members.

Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet
Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance

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?
Members of our staff have identified specific strategies for resolving conflict and practice those strategies to become more proficient. Members of our staff seek ways to test competing assumptions through action research and are willing to re-think their position when research, data, and information contradict their suppositions. Members of our staff are able to approach disagreements with high levels of trust and an assumption of good intentions on the part of all members because they have found common ground in their purpose and priorities.				

Part Five
Tips for Moving Forward: Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance

1. Teach and practice skills for dealing with conflict.

2. Ask teams to apply Senge's strategies for inquiry and advocacy (presented in chapter 5) to a current issue that is not laden with emotion. For example, a team could consider, "Should we keep minutes of our team meetings?" Debrief at the end of the exercise. What did we observe? What did we learn? How did we feel? Did we stay with the strategy? When would it be appropriate to use? How could we use it more effectively?

3. Ask teams to role-play a situation regarding a more volatile issue using the crucial conversation strategies we presented in this chapter. Once again, debrief at the end of the exercise.

4. Visit the Crucial Skills web site (www.vitalsmarts.com) and click on "Free Stuff" to get free video clips and role-play exercises for crucial conversations.

5. Create cues you can use to refocus when participants seem to be resorting to fight or flight. Signal timeout or simply ask, "Are we moving away from dialogue?"

6. Remember that facts are the required homework for any crucial conversation. What are the facts you can bring to the dialogue?

7. Build shared knowledge when faced with contrasting positions. Seek agreement on what research or evidence could help lead you to a more informed conclusion.

8. Use action research to explore differences. Create strategies that allow participants to put their theories to the test.

9. Recognize that conflicts are more productive when members have found common ground on major issues and approach one another with an assumption of good intentions.

10 Remember that you are attempting to develop new skills that will require practice. As Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler advise, "Don't expect perfection; aim for progress" (p. 228).

11 Be tender with one another.

(continued)

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

To Assess the Climate for Creating Consensus and Responding to Resistance in Your School or District, Ask:

1. What evidence do we have that district goals are directly impacting the work of schools and collaborative teams within the school?

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2. Do we have an operational definition of consensus in our school? Do we know at what point in the decision-making process we will move forward with an initiative?

____

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3. Do we have a sense of what decisions require consensus? When do we want to involve all staff in the decision-making process? Who decides who decides?

____

____

4. Should individual members of our staff be permitted to disregard agreements we have made as a staff? What is the appropriate response if they do?

____

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5. Identify a conflict that has emerged in our school in the past. How was that conflict addressed?

____

____

6. Are we building shared knowledge and conducting action research in an effort to address conflict productively? Can we cite an example in which we resolved a difference of opinion through examining the research or conducting our own action research?

____

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7. Describe the process we currently use to resolve conflict. What skills could we identify and practice to become more effective in this important area?

8. Do we view conflict as something to be avoided?

9. Do we expect administrators to resolve conflict or do we work together to address it in ways that improve our effectiveness?

10. Are we developing our skills to hold crucial conversations? (For a free team assessment tool, go to www.vitalsmarts.com/CrucialSkills/FreeStuff and click on "Where Do You Stand.")

11. Do we have a common understanding of our purpose—learning for all—and of our priorities, our goals, and our expectations of one another that are aligned with that purpose? Does this shared understanding allow us to be open with each other? Do we operate with an assumption of the good intentions of our members?

Final Thoughts

Educational leaders who make a good faith effort to implement every suggestion presented in the preceding chapters will nevertheless confront a brutal fact: Leading a substantive change process, one that impacts the very culture of the organization, is a complex and often bewildering endeavor. Chapter 9 examines what we have come to understand about the change process in schools and school districts.