

13th Annual

Thinking & Learning Conference

COLIN SLOPER

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**Transformative Leadership in a PLC:
Cultivating a collaborative culture**

Session 1

MELBOURNE

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TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION: Five commitments for leading a PLC

According to Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2006), the typical human response is to address almost all problems as if they require small, incremental steps. However, when problems are complex – like the pivotal PLC problem of how to guarantee high levels of learning for all students – a more radical approach is required. As Fullan (2001) explains, 'The big problems of the day are complex, rife with paradoxes and dilemmas. For these problems, there are no once-and-for-all answers' (p. 73). These problems require change that warrants decisive, swift action, since 'schools that go slow and do a little at a time' may 'end up doing so little that they succeed only in upsetting everything without accruing the benefits of change' (Sizer quoted in Fullan 1993, p. 78).

So, which of the 21 responsibilities are appropriate when first-order change is required, and which are most appropriate for second-order change? All 21 responsibilities define the standard operating procedures in a school and typify first-order change. Second-order change, however, is most closely related to seven of the 21 responsibilities. They are as follows:

- Change Agent
- Flexibility
- Ideals/Beliefs
- Intellectual Stimulation
- Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
- Monitoring/Evaluating
- Optimiser

Let us consider each of these seven responsibilities briefly in relation to the role of a PLC leader.

CHANGE AGENT

In alignment with Action 2.1, this responsibility refers to the extent that a leader is willing to challenge the status quo and upset a school's equilibrium in order to drive transformation.

The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- consciously challenging the status quo
- being willing to lead change initiatives with uncertain outcomes
- systematically considering new and better ways of doing things
- consistently attempting to operate at the edge versus the centre of the school's competence (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 45)

COMMITMENT 2: Find the courage you need to lead

In research involving interviews with 19 principals of Victorian schools, Gurr (2002) found that these Australian leaders 'generally describe themselves ... as showing transformational leadership qualities' (p. 90). According to Bass and Avolio (1996), transformational leadership is

a process in which the leaders take actions to increase their associates' awareness of what is right and important, to raise their associates' motivational maturity and to move their associates to go beyond the associates' own self-interests for the good of the group, organisation, or society. (p. 11)

In other words, transformational leaders are agents of change, both for individuals within the school and for the school as a whole. In a PLC, transformational leadership inspires high levels of commitment and motivation, as transformational leaders are able to develop models of collaborative practice that create high levels of collective responsibility. This in turn establishes a culture of innovation in which staff members feel secure enough to take risks and trial new ideas.

Yet becoming a change agent is not as simple as it sounds. It is inevitable that even the most courageous of PLC leaders will experience some degree of discomfort, disagreement or resistance to the process; after all, change often challenges deeply held beliefs, and 'even the most assertive of teachers can be fearful of change' (Fullan 2008, p. 61). As John Kenneth Galbraith (1971) once said, 'Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.' In response, Fullan (2001) proposes that change agents don't 'live more peacefully, but ... they can handle more uncertainty – and conflict – and are better at working through complex issues in ways that energize rather than deplete the commitment of the organizational members' (p. 15).

FLEXIBILITY

This responsibility refers to the extent to which leaders can adapt to the needs of a changing situation, are comfortable with dissent and can see things from different perspectives. The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- adapting one's leadership style to the needs of specific situations
- being directive or non-directive as the situation warrants
- encouraging people to express diverse and opposing opinions
- being comfortable with making major changes in how things are done (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 49)

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Flexibility refers to the degree to which leaders adjust their leadership style to account for the current reality and to manage conflict. Like the Change Agent responsibility, this responsibility is associated with transformational leadership. Transformational leaders use flexibility to help people adapt in order to meet mutual goals. They emphasise communication, positive relationships, support and accountability (Muhammad & Hollie 2012).

In creating a shared understanding and common language, PLC leaders re-envisage collegial conflict as critical to growth. They spend time developing a culture in which courageous conversations are introduced, practised and then embedded into the school's culture.

IDEALS/BELIEFS

This responsibility refers to leader's role in shaping the ideals and beliefs that underpin the mission and vision of the school (see Commitment 4). The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- committing to well-defined beliefs about schools, teaching, and learning
- sharing beliefs about school, teaching, and learning with the staff
- aligning behaviours so that they are consistent with beliefs (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 51)

In the words of De Pree (1989), 'practice without belief is a forlorn existence' (p. 55). If human beings are at their best when they operate from a set of strong ideals and beliefs (Marzano 2006), then shared values are a key element of effective PLCs, and it is the leader's responsibility to foster and promote these values. The question of ideals and beliefs in a PLC goes back to the issue of school culture – discussed in Commitment 1 – as the ideas and beliefs that typify a conventional school must be modified in order to create the schoolwide culture of collaboration necessary to propel the PLC process.

INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION

This responsibility refers to the extent to which the school leader ensures that all staff members are aware of the most current theories and practices regarding effective learning. The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- continually exposing staff to contemporary research and theory on effective schooling
- keeping informed about current research and theory on effective schooling

COMMITMENT 2: Find the courage you need to lead

- fostering systematic discussion regarding current research and theory on effective schooling (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 53)

The responsibility of Intellectual Stimulation requires PLC leaders to ensure that all members of staff are familiar with the latest research and theory pertaining to quality teaching, as discussions around these topics are an integral part of PLC culture. For Fullan (2001), this responsibility involves 'knowledge building, knowledge sharing, knowledge creation [and] knowledge management' (p. 77). Leaders who prioritise Intellectual Stimulation deliberately and regularly weave discussions on contemporary research into their everyday interactions with the school community.

Lashway (2001) sees the exposure of staff to new knowledge as a key driver of the change process, explaining that 'deep changes require deep learning, and leaders must build teacher learning into the everyday fabric of school life' (p. 7). Marzano (2015) has argued that distributed knowledge, collective capacity and shared responsibility are a more powerful catalyst for improvement than the abilities of the best teachers working in isolation, while additional research indicates that

a school's social capital – the connections between educators and the extent to which they exchange and build on each other's knowledge – is just as powerful a predictor of student achievement as raw human capital – the skills of individual teachers. (National Center for Literacy Education 2013, p. 4)

As this evidence suggests, it is critical for PLC leaders to ensure that even the most controversial new ideas are discussed and shared collaboratively, as it is through this collective process that theory can be transformed into practice.

KNOWLEDGE OF CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

This responsibility refers to the extent to which the school leader is a leader of learning. The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- possessing extensive knowledge about effective instructional practices
- possessing extensive knowledge about effective curricular practices
- possessing extensive knowledge about effective assessment practices
- providing conceptual guidance regarding effective classroom practices (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 55)

TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION: Five commitments for leading a PLC

Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment is a key responsibility in a PLC, since a PLC leader's primary role 'is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement' (Elmore 2000, p. 13). In addition to taking a transformational approach to leadership, successful PLC leaders are also instructional leaders: they focus upon the direct impact of teacher practice on student outcomes. In the words of Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd (2009), 'Instructional leadership establishes an academic mission; provides feedback on teaching and learning; and promotes professional development' (p. 88). In order to fulfil the goal of improving outcomes for every student, instructional leaders are required to both cultivate a comprehensive understanding of curriculum, instruction and assessment, and to use this knowledge to guide classroom practice. As Robinson (2006) maintains, school leaders 'cannot competently and confidently lead instructional improvement, even with substantial delegation of responsibilities, without in-depth and up-to-date knowledge of at least one curriculum area' (p. 72).

MONITORING/EVALUATING

This responsibility refers to how the leader uses evidence and data to ensure that the direction in which the school is headed results in tangible improvements in student learning. The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

- continually monitoring the effectiveness of the school's curricular, instructional, and assessment practices
- being continually aware of the impact of the school's practices on student achievement (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 56)

The concept of monitoring and accountability is not new. Too often, however, accountability has been imposed on schools from the outside in the form of school inspections and standardised tests. In fact, the most effective form of accountability occurs when professionals engage in self-assessment and then actively take steps to bring about improvement. The responsibility of Monitoring/Evaluating stipulates that it is a PLC leader's role to monitor the extent to which school practices have an effect on student achievement. This form of accountability requires strong commitment and a clear vision: 'The more understood, accepted and cohesive the culture of a school, the better able it is to move in concert toward ideals it holds and objectives it wishes to pursue' (Sergiovanni 1995, p. 46).

OPTIMISER

This responsibility refers to the extent to which the school leaders inspire others and act as a driving force behind the implementation of challenging innovations. The specific behaviours and characteristics associated with this responsibility are as follows:

COMMITMENT 2: Find the courage you need to lead

- inspiring teachers to accomplish things that might be beyond their grasp
- being the driving force behind major initiatives
- portraying a positive attitude about the ability of staff to accomplish substantial things (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2006, p. 56)

The transformation that the PLC process sets in motion is impossible to achieve unless a significant group of stakeholders within the school believe that useful change is possible. Without a compelling vision, a transformational effort can dissolve into a fragmented list of confusing projects that take the school in the wrong direction or nowhere at all. In failed school improvement, there is often plenty of plans and programs but no vision, leaving teachers confused and alienated. Sometimes leaders do have a sense of direction, but it is communicated to staff in a way that is too complicated or obscure to be useful.

Research suggests that optimism is a critical characteristic of an effective school leader. As Leithwood and colleagues (2006) note, 'school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions' (p. 10). The school leader commonly sets the emotional tone in a school developing an environment where 'new ideas and innovation abound' (Blase & Kirby 2000, p. 5). While it may not be easy to maintain an optimistic vision in the face of staff scepticism or resistance, successful PLC leaders have the courage to stick with their vision and take the necessary steps to achieve high levels of learning for all students.

REFLECTION

PLC leadership is not easy. It takes commitment, Second-order change – the change required to transform schools in order to improve learning for all students – requires courage and relentless focus. As Fritz (1994) explains, talk without action is

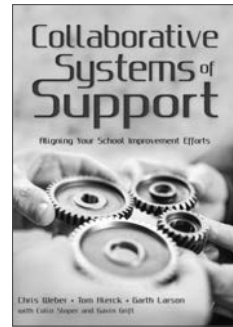
often employed by people who 'hold the vision' while ignoring what is going on around them. These are the idle dreamers who give real visionaries a bad name. Not to confuse a creator with a dreamer. Dreamers only dream, but creators bring their dreams into reality. Only an accurate awareness of reality and an accurate awareness of your vision will enable you to form structural tension as an important part of the creative process. (p. 118)

This is far from easy to do – but the struggle and effort is worth it! The following scenario illustrates the significance of courageous, focused school leadership in driving whole-school improvement.

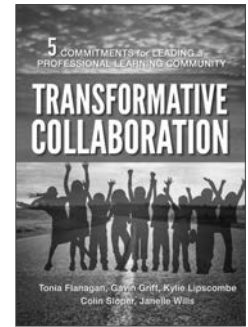
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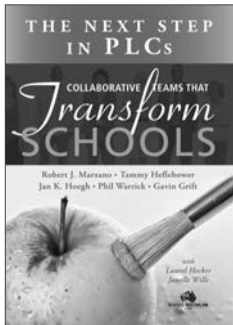
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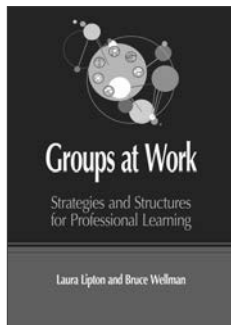
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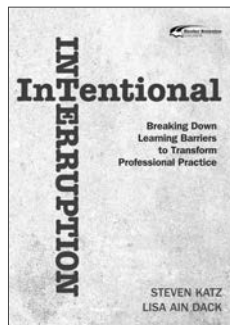
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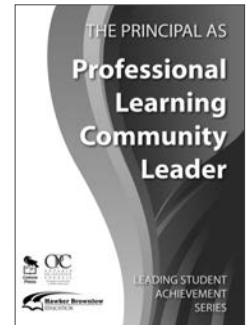
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