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COLIN SLOPER

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**Transformative Leadership in a PLC:
The learning-centred principal**

Session 3

MELBOURNE

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authority to make the necessary structural changes. Not only do school leaders build the context for the PLC work, they also build the required organisational structures and address any structural barriers that exist. From the beginning of the PLC journey, leaders must make it a priority to reorganise the school so that all endeavours, of all educators, are directed towards the achievement of learning at high levels for all students.

When commencing the PLC journey, leaders may be uncertain as to the changes required or daunted by the prospect of having to make changes to historically embedded school structures. However, as collaborative teams start to form and barriers are identified within existing structures, leaders in a PLC must support educators to adapt to the new way they are being asked to work. Leaders who support educators through the creation of supportive structures ensure that the foundations for collaboration are established. Then, as a school proceeds further down the PLC path, an important aspect of the school leader's role is to monitor and adjust the structural organisation of the school in order to keep abreast of cultural changes and support continued transformation.

Each school is different, and so school structures will vary according to the school context. One constant, however, is that PLC leaders must build and adapt school structures in ways that promote interdependence and collaboration. Lee, Smith and Croninger (1995) found that schools that implemented structural changes involving reduced hierarchy and increased collaboration had higher achievement rates and smaller achievement gaps than schools with a more conventional structure. Alongside a schoolwide culture of collaboration, structures which support collaboration must be established in order for a PLC to develop and flourish.

For leaders undertaking the PLC journey, two messages are clear:

- Certain foundational structures must be in place to facilitate the development of a PLC.
- Ongoing attention and adjustments must be made to structural and organisational arrangements as educators' capacity to work in a PLC continues to develop and flourish.

ACTION 4.3: CULTIVATE STRUCTURES FOR A HIGH-PERFORMING PLC

The collaborative learning-focused culture that PLC leaders are trying to establish is at once demonstrated and supported by the structural changes that leaders undertake in their schools. Through structural modifications, leaders of PLCs build the infrastructure to allow PLCs to take root and grow. But which structures are most deserving of a school leaders' attention? Our experience has led us to identify the following primary areas on which PLC leaders may need to reflect:

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- structures to develop school mission and vision statements
- structures that promote distributed leadership
- structures for schoolwide communication
- structures to ensure effective collaborative teams
- structures that maximise student learning
- structures for celebrating PLC progress

It should be noted that the structures required to establish a high-functioning PLC are not discrete, nor do they exist in a vacuum. Just as the culture and structures in a PLC are symbiotic, the structures themselves impact on one another. When you change one structure to progress the work of the PLC, others will be affected and require further alteration. Ultimately, continued school improvement means continuous school change.

STRUCTURES TO DEVELOP SCHOOL MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

One of the most foremost considerations when transforming a school into a PLC is the development of the school's mission and vision statements (DuFour et al, 2007).

- The school's *mission statement* answers the fundamental questions of why the school exists and what it is trying to achieve. It clearly articulates to all stakeholders the school's fundamental purpose. For educators, the mission statement inspires them in the work they do on a daily basis.
- The school's *vision statement* describes what the school must become to achieve its mission. It guides the transformations that must occur to move the school closer to making its mission a reality. An effective and compelling vision statement also allows the school to minimise actions and endeavours that might impact on its ability to achieve its mission.

Successful PLC leaders are aware that mission and vision statements must be more than just words on paper. Instead, they need to guide actions and behaviours in the school on a daily basis. These statements document the shared beliefs and understandings that unite every individual and collaborative team within the school. They provide a blueprint for improvement and must therefore underpin the shared commitments enacted by all.

In the early stages of the PLC transformation, structures must be established to ensure that adequate time and input is allowed for the shared development of mission and vision statements. School leaders need to consider how they are going to create the forums, time and processes necessary to allow representatives of the school to jointly develop a common understanding of the direction in which the school aims to go. The following are some key

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points to consider when devising structures to support the development of mission and vision statements:

- Educators who are expected to contribute significantly to the PLC process must be given the opportunity for input, discussion and debate. This ensures that there is a strong sense of ownership in and commitment to the direction set. As the mission and vision expressed in the statements must be lived by all community members, particularly the educators doing the work on a daily basis, structures established to develop the school's direction must allow time for the development of a compelling argument as to why everyone should commit to the PLC process.
- Participants involved in devising the direction outlined in the school's mission and vision statements must be informed and knowledgeable. If a diverse range of stakeholders is to be involved, school leaders must invest in building their capacity to contribute. This will help to ensure that the future direction developed for the school is research-based, credible and focused on improving standards of student learning.
- The structures established must allow time for deep and meaningful discussions to take place. Rushed or poorly planned meetings prevent a solid foundation from being laid, which can jeopardise possible future action. Prior preparation, adequate resourcing and a clear procedure will ensure that this foundational undertaking is as efficient as possible.
- The school's mission and vision should challenge old paradigms, not reinforce them. The development of mission and vision statements provides the opportunity to test the shared beliefs of educators and key stakeholders, so the structures established must allow for beliefs to be tested and challenged, particularly in relation to the ability of all students to learn at high levels.
- To turn the school's mission and vision into meaningful action, school leaders must ensure that the community connects with and internalises it. Every meeting and every communication strategy should in some way be used as an opportunity to further cement the school's mission and vision into every school community member's consciousness.
- The school leadership team need to be mindful that as the school becomes increasingly effective as a PLC, and as educators' skills and capabilities develop, mission and vision statements may need to be revised due to the increased collective understanding of what can be achieved by working as a PLC. For example, when starting the PLC journey, educators might not be convinced of the impact they can have on student learning and may therefore limit the vision they set. As they start seeing the results of working in collaborative teams, their understanding of the level of learning possible will rise. In this case, the school's mission and vision may need to be reviewed in light of the increasing levels of student achievement.

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To understand the importance of ongoing attention to the school's mission and vision, consider the following comparison of two schools that differ significantly in their approach to the structural implementation of their mission and vision statements.

Several years ago, the staff and community at Northwest School put a lot of work into developing the school's mission and vision statements. At this time, the leadership team formed focus groups of staff members and worked with key stakeholders to develop well-articulated document that encapsulated the ethos that the school was trying to achieve. Everyone involved in the process was happy with the developed document, and its completion was celebrated. The school's vision and mission were proudly displayed in the school foyer and appeared as a footer in the fortnightly school newsletter.

Over the years, however, the school's mission and vision have become less prominent in the minds of the educators and other community members as they focus instead on the daily tasks they have to perform. When a school leader speaks to a member of staff who joined the school after the mission and vision were developed, she is shocked to discover that this teacher is unaware of the school's strategic direction. When she quizzes longer-serving staff members she discovers that they also have only a superficial understanding of the school's mission and vision. She realises that these important cornerstones of the school have never performed their intended role of underpinning and guiding the daily work of the school community. Instead, they have become at best another accountability task for educators to tick off their to-do list – and at worst, they have been forgotten altogether.

At Southeast School, the situation is quite different. Although both schools went through a similar process to devise their mission and vision statements, the school leaders at Southeast also developed a plan to ensure that the mission and vision would be lived at the school on a daily basis. Rather than simply adding the mission of the school to the often-ignored footer of the newsletter, the mission is also referred to regularly in newsletter articles; further, it features prominently on the school's website and is re-presented to parents at all school-based events. Meanwhile, teachers in their classrooms link the school's mission to the learning goals being shared with students.

To ensure that teachers keep the school's mission and vision at the forefront of their practice, each staff meeting begins with reference to the statements, and short activities are organised for each meeting to ensure that educators

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are internalising the mission and vision. Staff even generate ideas through addressing the question, 'What can staff do to show that they are living the school's mission and vision?' These ideas for professional behaviours are constantly discussed. It is expected that all teachers will demonstrate them. Staff are regularly encouraged to assess their actions and professional practice against the statements and discard practices and programs that do not directly contribute towards their achievement. Even small gains are acknowledged, while milestones are cause for community celebration.

At Southeast School, the mission and vision statements are no longer words on a piece of long-forgotten paper. Instead, they have become so institutionalised that they are the driving force behind both the school's culture supported by the structures purposely put in place.

STRUCTURES THAT PROMOTE DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Becoming a PLC necessitates changes to the leadership structures of the school. In a PLC, each collaborative team is empowered to undertake collective inquiry to achieve the PLC mission of high levels of learning for all students. Working together, educators become co-learners as they reflect on learning data to improve teaching practices. This change in the basic dynamic of the way in which educators work means that leadership is no longer centralised but instead distributed across the school. In this way, professional collaboration is a foundation for *distributed leadership*.

Distributed leadership concentrates upon collaborative interaction between individuals in formal and informal leadership roles, sharing out some of the leadership and management responsibilities while keeping the leadership team at the centre (Dinham 2008; Harris & Spillane 2008). Harris (2014) describes distributed leaders as being

primarily concerned with mobilizing leadership experience at all levels in the organisation to generate more opportunities for change and to generate the capacity for improvement. The emphasis is upon *interdependent interaction and practice* rather than *individual and independent actions* associated with those with formal leadership roles and responsibilities. (p. 36)

Harris (2014) emphasises that distributed leadership is about connecting leadership practice as closely as possible to learning and teaching practices and empowering others as partners in school transformation. Distributed leadership therefore addresses Fullan's (2011) assertion that there has been an over-reliance on the 'wrong drivers' for system reform in which

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external accountability is presumed to drive results. Leadership in a PLC empowers people to perform by building their capacity to do so and holds them accountable for performance (Sahlberg 2011).

However, distributed leadership doesn't just happen. The distributed leadership approach of a highly effective PLC has to be carefully planned, and structures must be created to allow for it to develop. Development of educators' ability to thrive under a distributed leadership approach – and the opportunity to exercise these skills – needs to be deliberately structured into the school's operations and meeting schedules. Advancing the school's journey to become a high-performing PLC requires the establishment of planned opportunities to support the development of knowledge about how to work collaboratively together, how to deal with conflict as it arises, how to maintain a professional focus when drawing conclusions from student learning data, how to identify best teaching practices, and so on. The structuring of such opportunities as part of the school's operations provides a regular avenue for ongoing support and professional learning for collaborative team facilitators and members.

Leadership in a PLC is distributed to ensure that team members have a sense of ownership and a commitment to team actions. Without some overall coordination, however, the work can quickly deviate off track. Under the PLC model, the role of the principal and leadership team is to serve each collaborative team as the teams focus on achieving the school's mission – and part of this is the responsibility to 'grow leaders' across the school. As such, it is essential that regular and targeted meetings are held between collaborative team facilitators and the leadership team with a focus on how best to lead a collaborative team.

Again, we turn to the example of two contrasting schools to demonstrate the way in which structures that promote distributed leadership are essential for PLC success.

The principal of Northwest School has recently attended a professional learning session on PLCs and is excited about what this transformation might bring. Educators at the school are already working in teams, and the principal feels sure that with a little refinement and some advice and professional reading, the teams will be able to quickly adjust their work to be more in line with the collaborative team practices that distinguish a PLC. When he approaches the school's existing team facilitators, they are eager to learn more about how to work collaboratively.

The principal meets with the facilitators and outlines the PLC process. He explains collaborative teamwork and gives the facilitators articles to read. Upon monitoring the first few team meetings, he is pleased with the transformation. He believes that each collaborative team should be given

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independence to do their work, so he gives each team increasing autonomy. Yet when he revisits the teams several months later, the principal is shocked to discover that many have reverted to their old way of working or have even stopped meeting altogether.

The principal of Southeast School attends the same professional learning session, but she approaches implementation differently. Upon her return to school, she first works with her leadership team to develop an implementation plan with the aim of making sure that the transformation is paced out as much as possible. The principal then conducts a whole-staff professional learning session in which staff critically consider how the PLC process will assist them to achieve higher levels of learning for all students. At this meeting, assumptions and beliefs are respectfully challenged and interest is generated.

The principal ensures that she and key members of her leadership team meet regularly with individual team facilitators to discuss how things are going and offer support in any way necessary. Common issues or concerns across teams are identified, and these become the focus of professional learning for facilitators and team members. Existing forums, such as staff meetings, are used to enhance the capabilities of educators to work interdependently as part of a PLC. As well as their individual meetings with school leaders, team facilitators get together on a regular basis to share their teams' journeys, celebrate their successes and learn from one another.

Professional learning about the PLC process is targeted to meet the needs of each team, and teams are encouraged to share best PLC practices. Not only are teams supported and assisted by the school's leaders, but time is set aside and protected to ensure that this happens. Because building the collaborative capabilities of educators is seen as a high priority by school leaders, it becomes embedded in the way the school operates. Continuous capability-building fosters in educators a deep sense that they will be continually supported in the new way they were being asked to work.

STRUCTURES FOR SCHOOLWIDE COMMUNICATION

Effective channels of communication are essential in any transformative process to ensure that all community members clearly understand the change. In establishing a PLC, it is vital that communication structures are reviewed and then modified, or dismantled and re-established, to eliminate boundaries and hierarchies that inhibit the flow of information.

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Schools are complex organisations that involve a lot of daily administrative and organisational procedures. Communication of these procedures and their requirements can clog meeting agendas and collaborative team time, so it is vital that educators can access this necessary information in a way that does not involve valuable collaboration time being lost. Communication structures need to effectively manage the volume of information that educators need to know on a daily basis so that precious team time is not wasted on discussions of lower-impact issues.

School leaders can establish a range of communication structures and procedures so that such information is readily available to educators. Both written communication structures – such as daily bulletins, emails, published meeting minutes and bulletin boards – and oral communication structures – daily staff briefings, time-bound information-sharing sessions at staff meetings, and informal direct conversations – assist greatly in ensuring ready access to necessary information.

Introducing and utilising communication structures such as these also ensures that time at collaborative team meetings is reserved for purposeful dialogue and discussion about the primary purpose of school: student learning. Any communication structures established within a PLC must not intrude on the collaborative team mandate of productive dialogue on the issues that matter most in achieving high levels of learning for all students.

Developing efficient channels of communication that limit non-essential information will allow the communication landscape to shift in a way that privileges in-depth dialogue between educators about teaching practice and student learning. By ensuring the required communication structures are in place to share important organisational and administrative requirements that schools must attend to, opportunity and time is created to allow teams to get on with the task of improving student learning.

The below scenario highlights the markedly different outcomes that two different approaches to schoolwide communication can have.

At Northwest School, collaborative teams have been embedded into the school's operations for several years. All educators are allocated to a team and a schoolwide collaborative meeting schedule is established.

School leaders are happy with the structures that have been put in place, but they have become increasingly concerned that there has been little improvement in student learning. Even the educators who were initially most enthusiastic about the PLC process have begun to exhibit higher levels of frustration, and

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some have complained publicly that collaborative team meetings intrude on time when they could be planning lessons or marking assessments.

The leadership team at Northwest School decides to question a few of the more dedicated educators to gather information about what is going on. Educator after educator reports that meetings are being consumed with the sharing of information, the completion of administrative duties and other tasks not directly related to student learning. When the school leaders dig deeper to analyse the demands being placed on teams, they are shocked to discover that many are coming from the leadership team themselves.

At Southeast School, by contrast, the leadership team takes steps to explicitly build consensus among staff about which tasks are appropriate to include on a collaborative team's meeting agenda. Educators are taught how to 'car park' some less-pressing issues when they arise during collaborative team discussions so that they can be followed up at the appropriate time. A daily bulletin is established and becomes the central point for all school communications and reminders.

The leadership team models a focus on learning by acting as a filter to make sure that staff meetings focus on professional learning or collaborative problem-solving. They monitor collaborative team meetings and respectfully challenge teams when items appear that do not relate to the PLC process. The leadership team raises the status and importance of collaborative team meetings by supporting teams to ensure that they can focus on the right work.

STRUCTURES TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Scheduled time to meet and plan

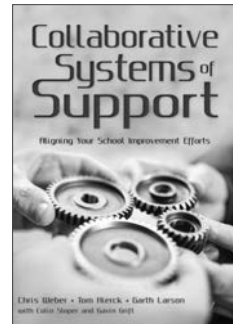
Most people involved in school improvement agree that the most critical factor is time. What's more, research validates this commonly held belief. According to Raywid (1993), 'collaborative time for teachers to undertake and then sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment, facilities or even staff development'.

Given that collaborative teams are the engines of school improvement when it comes to achieving high levels of student learning, one of the most important questions that needs to be resolved when transforming from a conventional school into a PLC is, 'When will collabo-

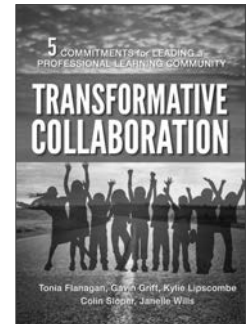
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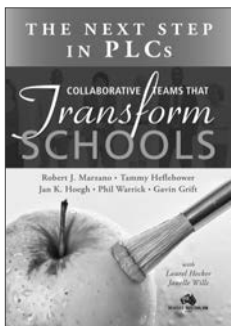
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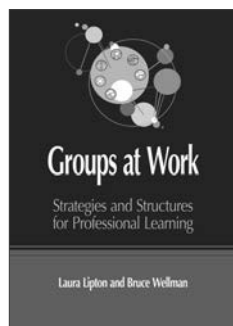
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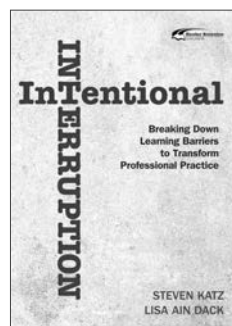
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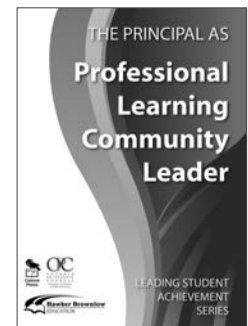
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