

13th Annual

# Thinking & Learning Conferences

**GAVIN GRIFT**

Saturday 21 May

**Collaborative Teams that Transform  
Schools: The next steps in PLCs**

Session 2

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# GAVIN GRIFT

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Gavin is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Assessing the Whole Child* (2007), *Teachers as Architects of Learning* (2013) and *Transformative Talk: Cognitive Coaches Share Their Stories* (2014). As a Centre for Professional Learning Communities (CPLC) training associate, he led the establishment of a PLC network within Australian schools. Gavin also serves as a training associate for Thinking Collaborative, which is the home of both Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools.

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CODE: MELGG0202  
0516

## COLLABORATIVE TEAMS THAT TRANSFORM SCHOOLS

*Instructionally, these Year 7 teams collaborate to find cross-curricular content linkages and make relevant connections for students. For example, if students are studying a specific region of the world in geography, English teachers might use literature from that region in their lessons. In some cases, these cross-curricular connections provide common assessment opportunities as well. One example of this is the study of a topic in science corresponding with the writing of a research essay in English. Students work on finding source information in their science class and then organise and write the essay during their English class. Teachers use the completed research essay as a common assessment for both classes. The science teacher assesses the science content and research design, while the English teacher assesses the writing and organisation.*

*The second collaborative team structure this school uses involves teachers who all teach the same courses, such as Year 11 English, physics or mathematics. These teams also focus on student achievement but with a greater emphasis on the development of common formative assessments and common interventions based on assessment results. Each of these teams also establishes student achievement goals related to the school's overall improvement goals. For example, a Year 11 mathematics collaborative team develops the following student achievement goal: achieve an overall passing rate of at least 80 per cent on the state test given in November. This goal supports the schoolwide improvement goal of increasing overall student performance in all areas of maths by 5 per cent as measured by state testing. To monitor progress towards this goal, the team uses common formative assessments to measure students' passing rates throughout the school year. When these results show it to be necessary, they collaborate on intervention and extension lessons.*

## Culture Within Collaborative Teams

We have already mentioned the importance of schoolwide processes and norms, but for individual collaborative teams to operate effectively, they must also develop a specific culture within their teams. Michael Fullan (2008) emphasised the importance of culture when he asserted that “*positive* purposeful peer interaction” (p. 45) is most likely to occur when three specific conditions are in place:

- (1) when the larger values of the organization and those of individuals and groups mesh; (2) when information and knowledge about effective practices are widely and openly shared; and (3) when monitoring mechanisms are in place to detect and address ineffective actions while also identifying and consolidating effective practices. (p. 45)

The first two of Fullan's three conditions – shared values and shared practices – are at the heart of effective collaborative teams. While structures (such as time to meet) and administrative support are important, they alone cannot create effective collaborative teams (AISR, 2004). A culture that promotes meaningful collaboration is essential.

In 2009, Hoffman and her colleagues published the results of a three-year study of five PLCs. Their findings shed light on the processes collaborative teams might use to establish an effective culture. The collaborative teams in this study all followed the same basic process: members established team functions and ground rules, developed trust, then focused on reading research and conducting projects relevant to their team. The researchers identified the following factors as important to culture: prior planning, diversity of participants,

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shared leadership, respect, team norms and responsiveness to questions and issues. Establishing these factors was an important first step for the teams, one that had to take place before they could engage in meaningful work.

Establishing the culture of a collaborative team is also an ongoing process. Collaborative teams always have the potential for success and for dysfunction, simply because they are made up of human beings (Lencioni, 2002). A successful collaborative team is not self-sustaining; it requires continuous care and attention: “Indeed, any complacency and slackening of effort might jeopardise the collective operation of the PLC that had been achieved. The promotional and sustaining effort could never cease because both the contexts and the PLCs themselves never ceased evolving” (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 73). Once norms and cultural practices are in place, they must be monitored for adherence and the need for adaptation.

Under the umbrella of culture, we suggest three elements that should be continually monitored.

1. Team norms
2. Trust and relationships
3. Productive collaboration

The following sections address each of these facets in more detail.

## Team Norms

Similar to schoolwide norms, team norms are the guiding principles by which a collaborative team governs itself and its work. Norms help validate the purposes of the team and provide a reminder of how team members have agreed to work with one another. Norms serve not only to inspire teams but also to keep them focused (Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). Examples of norms established by collaborative teams include the following.

- Expect all teachers to contribute to the team.
- Handle problems when they are still small.
- Recognise effort, not just results.
- Listen fully with the intention to understand.
- Share “air space” – give everyone the chance to contribute.
- Support the decisions of the team, even if the outcome was not your first choice.
- Respect the privacy of team members by asking before you share something beyond the team.
- Have courageous conversations! Don’t be afraid to speak your mind.

One of the first tasks that a newly established collaborative team should undertake is to generate a set of their own norms. It is important that each collaborative team generate their own norms. To do so, the team might hold a brainstorming session. Team members suggest various team norms, perhaps drawing inspiration from other teams of which they have been a part. The team might consider specific questions, such as the following.

- What behaviours do we expect to see frequently?
- What behaviours are unacceptable?
- How do we want to handle problems when they arise?

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Teams should also consider norms that address emotional, social and physical safety. Emotional safety norms might include “Know everyone’s names,” “Be willing to take others’ perspectives” and “Listen actively.” Social safety norms might govern issues like confidentiality, open discussions and decision-making, and gossip. While true physical safety is likely covered in a school’s employee handbook, a team might decide to enhance their physical environment by creating norms around the cleanliness, organisation and sufficiency of their meeting space.

Another powerful strategy that teams can use to come up with norms is to identify behaviours that are undesirable or counterproductive to collaboration. Once the team has described these behaviours, the team can flip them to create positively stated norms. For example, a team may recognise that being late to meetings is an issue. The norm to discourage this would simply become “We will be punctual.” As another example, a team might decide that using one’s mobile phone, laptop or tablet for personal reasons during a meeting is disrespectful. When flipped, the norm becomes “We will only use technology to support the goals of the meeting.”

As the team brainstorms, one member should record all suggestions, ideally on poster paper or a display board so the whole team can see and review the suggestions. If there are many suggestions, the team might work together to combine related options and create a more manageable list of norms. The team then collaborates to agree on the most important norms, which will become the adopted set of norms. There are many ways to go about this, such as engaging in a simple discussion, having members vote on their top three norms, or distributing stickers and having members indicate their votes on the poster paper. At the end of this process, the team should have between four and 10 agreed-upon norms. Once they establish the final list of norms, the team should create a description of each one, perhaps using “looks like” and “sounds like” to describe how the norm will manifest. As a last step, the team should take the time to discuss how they will hold one another accountable for the norms. For example, how will they celebrate when their team abides by the norms for a designated period of time? Contrastingly, how will they solve the problem if norms are disregarded?

After norms have been established, it is important to monitor adherence to them over time. This might be accomplished by having members periodically rate the team’s adherence to norms (for example, on a 1–4 scale). Figure 2.1 shows an example of what a norm-monitoring form might look like.

Norm	Example	Nonexample	Rating
Demonstrate respect for one another and our mutual learning.	Team members are supportive of others trying new instructional strategies.	Team members are disrespectful of the team by resisting new ideas.	
Listen fully with the intention to understand.	Team members practise active listening skills, such as attending to the speaker, rephrasing for clarity and asking questions.	Team members engage in side conversations while others are speaking.	
Participate and contribute actively.	All team members take part in discussions, offering ideas and reacting to others’ thoughts.	One or more team members often disengage from the conversation.	

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Enter discussions with an open mind.	Team members fairly consider the merit of all proposed ideas.	Team members refuse to consider certain ideas.	
Share air space.	All team members participate somewhat equally in discussion.	One or two people dominate the conversation.	
Maintain confidentiality.	Team members only discuss student and/or teacher data within team meetings.	A teacher distributes student data or information about another team member outside the team.	
Follow time allocations.	The team focuses on each topic for the amount of time specified on the agenda.	Discussions of specific topics often run too long; as a result, other topics are ignored.	
Make decisions by consensus.	The team takes a vote on specific issues.	One team member imposes their decisions on the rest.	
Support decisions.	All team members accept the team's consensus, even if it was not their first choice.	Team members who disagree with the team's consensus refuse to take part.	
Have courageous conversations.	The team proactively discusses difficult topics before they become larger problems.	The team does not talk about things that are bothering them.	

**Figure 2.1: Example norm-monitoring chart.**

The rating scale shown in figure 2.1 allows individuals to evaluate how well the team has been abiding by specific norms. It allows the team to look at trends in the scores to identify areas for celebration and improvement. Lower scores like 1 or 2 would suggest that the team should either review a norm's importance or revisit the need for it. Reflection upon the pre-existing norms and how they are working is essential for efficient and effective team operations. Such scrutiny can be a reminder to modify, add or delete norms so that they are more representative of the needs of the team. The power of norms is not in creating them, but in following them. Appendix B (page 121) contains resources teams can use to create and monitor norms.

## Trust and Relationships

For collaborative teams (and, indeed, entire schools) to function optimally, team members must trust each other. One might describe trust by saying, "I can show you my true self and know that you won't take advantage of me" (Eurich, 2013, p. 24). It is sometimes easier to identify the absence of trust than it is to identify the presence of trust.

When collaborative teams do not have trust, team members tend to blame each other when problems occur instead of working together to fix them. Nontrusting team members waste energy worrying or trying to position themselves to look good relative to their peers. They are often anxious about speaking up, feeling unable to share their honest opinions. On the other hand, when trust *is* present, it can positively affect team

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performance. A study by Kurt T. Dirks (1999) found that “trust appeared to influence how motivation was translated into group process and performance. That is, in high-trust groups, motivation was transformed into joint efforts and hence higher performance, in low-trust groups, motivation was transformed into individual efforts” (Dirks, 1999, p. 453). Stated differently, when people trust each other, they can collaborate more effectively. Tasha Eurich (2013) described two types of trust that can be helpful for teams: competence-based trust and motive-based trust. *Competence-based trust* refers to people regarding each other as competent and reliable. They are knowledgeable about relevant topics and follow through on stated tasks. *Motive-based trust* refers to a person’s belief that someone has positive intentions. Clearly, both these elements are essential for trusting relationships.

In their book *Trust in Schools*, Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) posited a model of relational trust (that is, trust between people based on both beliefs and observations) in which people discern the trustworthiness of others based on four factors.

1. **Respect:** Does this person acknowledge that I also have an important role to play here?
2. **Competence:** Can this person do their job effectively?
3. **Personal regard for others:** Does this person care about the people around them?
4. **Integrity:** Does this person follow through on what they say?

The degree to which each of these factors is present in a collaborative team makes up the overall atmosphere of trust. If one element is significantly lacking, no amount of the others can entirely make up for it.

One simple tactic for building trust and good relationships between team members is for each person to share some details about themselves. When colleagues know each other as people, rather than just as co-workers, they are more inclined to trust each other. Another method is to conduct short team-building activities on a regular basis. Quick, engaging activities can instill the team with shared purpose, appreciation for differences and an element of enjoyment. Additionally, each team member should strive to demonstrate trustworthiness and qualities such as those identified by Eurich (2013) and by Bryk and Schneider (2002). For example, teachers might focus on the following recommendations.

- Take responsibility for your own words and actions. Do not make excuses; apologise when necessary.
- Arrive on time to meetings, and respond to email and other correspondence in a timely manner.
- Share relevant information candidly and transparently with the entire team.

Developing trust is a process, but it is essential for effective teamwork. Teams that use the strategies described in this section can put aside individual differences and focus on team accomplishments that serve students.

## Productive Collaboration

Productive collaboration refers to the quality and depth of interactions between team members:

All teacher interactions are not the same; professional discussions vary greatly in their degree of depth. Prior research suggests that typical conversations in teachers’ professional communities are of low depth, characterized by story swapping, sharing materials, and providing discrete bits of information or advice ... In contrast, high depth interactions focused on the pedagogical principles underlying instructional approaches [and] the nature of students’ ... thinking. (Coburn & Russell, 2008, pp. 1–2)

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Clearly, the majority of collaborative team work should fall into the category of high-depth interactions: discussing research-based instructional strategies, planning lessons, reviewing assessment data, and so on. To ensure this, protocols for productive collaboration should be set up from the beginning and their implementation monitored over time. Appendix B (page 121) includes resources to help teams focus on the right work.

In the course of PLC work, teams will necessarily discuss sensitive issues. Productive collaboration does not mean that everyone agrees all the time. In fact, it often means the opposite – frequent respectful disagreement is necessary. Teams that avoid healthy conflict cannot fully discuss an issue, and faked agreement can lead to superficiality. Robert J. Garmston and Bruce M. Wellman (2009) promoted the concept of *cognitive conflict*. They explained that “meetings must be safe but not necessarily comfortable ... Cognitive conflict – disagreements among group members about substantive issues ... – tend[s] to improve team effectiveness, lead to better decisions, and increase commitment, cohesiveness, empathy, and understanding” (p. 68). Cognitive conflict is different from personal conflict. Team members should argue about ideas, rather than with each other.

The ability to disagree respectfully is obviously related to trust: if team members do not trust each other, they may not speak honestly in order to avoid vulnerability or potential ridicule (Lencioni, 2002). To ensure discussions remain respectfully productive, it is useful to establish guidelines for interaction. Teams should avoid “unproductive patterns of listening, responding, and inquiring” (Garmston & Wellman, 2009, p. 28), which include autobiographical patterns (telling personal stories around a topic), inquisitive patterns (focusing too closely on non-critical issues) and solution patterns (jumping to a solution too quickly) (Garmston & Wellman, 2009). These negative discussion practices derail the conversation and inhibit good decision-making. Other common but destructive discussion practices include assuming that silence means agreement, allowing a few people to dominate and engaging in side conversations (Mackin, 2007).

It can be difficult for people to raise concerns or conflicting viewpoints about an idea without seeming combative or shutting down the person who posed the original idea. Discussion participants can use the following strategies (Davey, 2013) to disagree politely and without abruptly terminating the conversation.

- **Use *and* rather than *but* when expressing contradiction.** Employ this technique to acknowledge that, when two people express opinions, it is not necessarily true that one is right and one is wrong. For example, “I hear you saying that we should try this hands-on experiment with our students, and I wonder if we have enough materials for every class.”
- **Express opposing viewpoints in hypothetical terms.** Ask teammates to imagine the effects or consequences of a particular situation. For example, “What if we could get an expert from the community to come in? What would be the best way to structure the lesson in that situation?”
- **Raise the question of impact.** Ask open-ended questions about how a course of action might turn out. For example, “We’re discussing the option of having students work in groups on this; how will that impact their learning?”
- **Elicit underlying reasons.** Seek to better understand an opinion by asking questions that drive at the reasons, goals or rationale behind it. For example, “Your suggestion to have students take assessments on the computer is interesting; can you explain your reasons for suggesting that?”



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Appendix B (page 121) contains additional resources that can help teams engage in polite yet honest and in-depth discussions.

As with other aspects of culture, productive collaboration should be monitored regularly. One way to address this is through a survey. Each member of the team completes the survey individually and anonymously. Example survey items might include the following.

- I feel valued as a part of this team.
- My teammates listen to one another, even when ideas are contrary.
- I enjoy being a part of my collaborative team.
- My collaborative team addresses our agenda items in an efficient and effective manner.

Once all members of the team have completed the survey, the data can be reviewed to determine what the collaborative team is doing well and which issues must be addressed.

In addition to directly addressing these three aspects of team culture (team norms, trust and relationships, and productive collaboration), it is important for teams to be aware of the difficulties of the PLC process. In particular, teams should anticipate common frustrations and the possibility of resistant team members.

## Common Frustrations

Transitioning to and working in a collaborative team structure can be a frustrating process. It is unwise for educators to expect otherwise; rather, they should be aware of common difficulties so as not to become discouraged when such difficulties arise. Parry Graham and William M. Ferriter (2010) identified three general causes of frustrations during the transition into the PLC process. The first is time. Already in short supply in schools, time constraints can become even tighter in a PLC and in collaborative teams. Decision-making in a group naturally takes longer than individual decision-making. Graham and Ferriter (2010) explained:

As organizations become more collaborative, there is a trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness. Hierarchical organizations, in which a few people at the top make decisions that everyone else follows, are highly efficient ... but, they also allow little room for creativity and organizational learning. Collaborative organizations in which people work together to make decisions and learn from each other produce more effective decisions but are much less efficient. (p. 129)

However, it is worth noting that PLCs can also save time through common planning and materials.

The second common cause of frustration is social and philosophical friction. When people work closely together to make and implement decisions, their differing personalities, perspectives and philosophies can create potential conflict. Additionally, decisions made in a collaborative team affect the entire team (that is, members cannot simply ignore the decision), so individuals are more likely to speak up when they disagree.

The third cause of frustration is increased responsibility and accountability. The PLC process shifts a school from top-down decision-making to distributed leadership. While this is generally a good thing, it does increase teachers' responsibilities, which can cause stress. The PLC process requires teachers to look closely at results and be more accountable for ensuring that all students learn.

## Collaborative Team Rating Scales

Collaborative teams should periodically conduct formal audits of their collaboration and productivity. This scale, modelled after a proficiency scale, is intended to help collaborative teams measure their progress with regard to the functionality of the team. Teams can assess what level of the scale they have reached by comparing their work to the descriptions and sample indicators in figure A.3. Teams or schools can also use the blank reproducible (page 134) to create a customised autonomy scale and record evidence of their work at each level.

Score	Description	Indicators
<b>Score 4.0</b>	<p>Operational Autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective ownership of student achievement is evident in practice and products.</li> <li>Productive culture of collaboration is evident in practice and products.</li> <li>SMART goals are clearly defined and progress towards goals is monitored.</li> <li>The norms guide all practice and are evaluated for effectiveness by the team.</li> </ul>	<p>Critical areas such as curriculum, instruction, assessment and teacher development are the focus of meetings and agenda items.</p> <p>Common assessment data are a key element of team decision-making.</p> <p>SMART goal progress monitoring is in place.</p> <p>Periodically, the team reviews the norms to ensure they are being followed.</p>
<b>Score 3.0</b>	<p>Developing Autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective ownership of student achievement is emerging in some practices and products.</li> <li>Collaborative culture is emerging but not constant in practices and products.</li> <li>SMART goals are clearly defined.</li> <li>The norms are established and members hold themselves and each other accountable to the norms.</li> </ul>	<p>Critical areas such as curriculum, instruction, assessment and teacher development are sometimes the focus of meetings and agenda items.</p> <p>Collaboration is taking place on most issues within the scope of the collaborative team.</p> <p>SMART goals are appropriate and clearly defined.</p>
<b>Score 2.0</b>	<p>Partial Autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual ownership of student achievement is the predominant practice among team members.</li> <li>Collaboration is occurring on specific issues.</li> <li>SMART goals are defined but may need revision.</li> <li>The norms are established and individuals hold themselves accountable to the norms.</li> </ul>	<p>Teachers operate with a more individual focus on their practice and their specific students.</p> <p>Some aspects of team collaboration are beginning to occur.</p>
<b>Score 1.0</b>	<p>No Autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Norms have not been established.</li> <li>SMART goals have not been established.</li> <li>Collaboration is not evident.</li> </ul>	<p>Teachers actively avoid collaboration in favour of working alone.</p>

**Figure A.3: Collaborative team autonomy scale.**

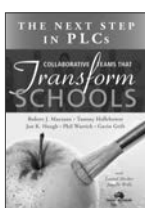


# RELATED RESOURCES

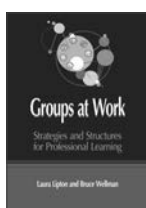
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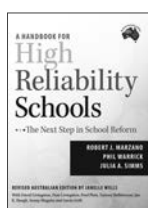
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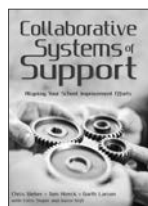
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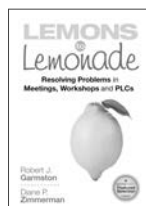
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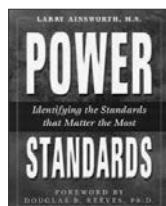
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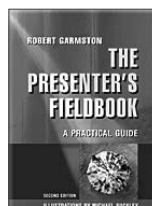
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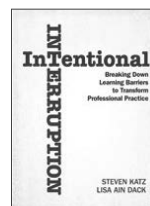
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