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**5 Commitments for Leading a PLC  
Session 3**

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# GAVIN GRIFT

With experience as a teacher, assistant principal and educational coach, Gavin Grift's passion, commitment and style have made him an in-demand presenter of keynotes, seminars and in-school support days. As a speaker, Gavin connects with national and international audiences on topics ranging from Cognitive Coaching and quality teacher practice to professional learning communities (PLCs) and learning-centred leadership.



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**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

continued

The school's leadership team does not want to enforce a rule that the same data protocol must be used across all teams – mainly because different assessment tasks may require dissimilar analysis. However, they are committed to ensuring that the data protocols used by teams reflect best practice in data analysis and ultimately lead to improved teaching and learning results.

The leadership team decide that the data protocol may be different from team to team but must include some non-negotiables. After engaging in readings and discussion using research and examples of data protocols, they identify a criterion that each team must include in their final product.

In the above example, school leaders ensure that each staff member is clear on common characteristics of the product, but they also make room for some flexibility in the design of the product to reflect the variations in data from each key learning area. This approach ensures commonality in agreed-upon practices, but it also makes it possible for educators to modify their final product to suit their context.

Product development takes time, commitment and a relentless process of inquiry into best practice. Leaders of PLCs must ensure that time and effort is not wasted on the creation of ineffective products that do not lead to improvements in student learning. Instead, leaders must support their colleagues to access relevant information to support product generation, so that each team creates effective products that are successful, useful and aligned to the school's mission and vision.

**ALIGNMENT OF PURPOSE, PROCESS AND PRODUCT**

School leaders can have a clear mission and vision for their school, but without clarity among all stakeholders about the right strategies and agreed implementation, very little progress will be made. When leaders fall into the trap of being ambiguous about the purpose, process and products of both cultural and structural changes, intentions become questionable, doubt begins to fester and efforts decrease. Leaders should carefully and strategically consider the culture they are trying to achieve and the structures that are required to support them to achieve such a culture. When all members of a school are clear about the purpose of what they are working on, the processes they would use and the products that are expected, then they are more likely to be successful in the change process. The success of this process is reliant on the clarity that leaders can provide.

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

**ACTION 5.3: CREATE CLARITY THROUGH PROTOCOLS**

Clarity in purpose, process and product is of great significance in reculturing schools to become PLCs. However, a major factor that can affect clarity is communication. One tool that school leaders can utilise to ensure clear communication, especially within collaborative teams, is protocols to enhance professional dialogue. Protocols allow school leaders to foster a culture that is rich in communication. This allows communication to go beyond sharing to one of professional challenge and inquiry. In Action 5.3 we will first provide some background about the use of protocols in a PLC and then share four protocols that educators can use to grow the collaborative dialogue of a PLC.

**THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION**

Research into dialogue highlights the importance of learning about oneself and others through discussing experiences, theories, hopes and fears (Clark 2001; Dalton 2010). Leading social constructivists such as Bandura (1993), Bruner (1985) and Piaget (1973) place dialogue at the centre of learning, as learning is understood to be a social process. More recently, Graham (2007) describes how within a collaborative team structure, dialogue is the foundation of the learning community, since it is the medium through which all information is exchanged. These theories and beliefs are significant within a PLC, where collaborative dialogue is paramount to learning.

Dialogue, according to Burbules (1993), must encapsulate at least two points of view and requires participants to mediate between more than one perspective (p. xii). It is within this mediation that clarity of intention and meaning is vital – for without it, relationships between colleagues can be broken. Clark (2001) employs criteria for teacher conversations to ensure different viewpoints are heard. The criteria include:

- articulating implicit theories and beliefs
- developing a sense of personal and professional identity
- receiving hope and relational connections
- reaffirmation of ideals and commitments
- developing specific techniques and solutions to problems
- learning how to engage in learning conversations

The above criteria are a useful frame for leaders to reflect on the current state of dialogue within collaborative teams and set goals for future development. Leaders should be clear on the strategies that they can use to encourage professional discussion that centres on teaching and learning. Protocols allow collaborative teams to hold each other accountable for in-

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structional practice and results, respect each other's opinions and, most importantly, believe that they are always capable of improving their own practice (Elmore 2004; Fullan 2001).

**USING PROTOCOLS TO SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE**

Dialogue about student learning and teaching practice in ways that will lead to improved learning results is essential to school improvement. As Elmore and colleagues (2009) explain, 'The problem is not that the schools don't have access to knowledge. The problem is that they don't have a process of translating that knowledge systematically into practice' (p. 9). Professional conversations may become shallow because the language does not support a collaborative understanding of teaching and learning. This suggests that the language in collaborative interactions can become a barrier to developing common understandings.

One way to overcome this obstacle is through the use of protocols. According to Glaude (2011), 'A protocol is a process for guiding a professional learning conversation. The purpose of a protocol is to build the skills and promote the culture necessary for ongoing collaborative learning' (p. 2). Glaude offers the following list of traits to explain how protocols can support clear and effective dialogue in professional learning conversations:

A protocol:

- keeps a group conversation focused in order to generate a wealth of helpful conversation and feedback in a limited amount of time
- encourages all members of the group to offer their most thoughtful and useful feedback and/or insights on a specific topic
- helps less verbal participants offer their voices into the conversation
- promotes thoughtfulness by allowing personal reflection time within a group conversation
- encourages lively dialogue featuring multiple perspectives
- requires any individuals presenting their personal work to remain silent so that the feedback and insights offered from their colleagues are not lost
- reminds individuals to return to the evidence offered in the text or the video, rather than offering opinions, when conversations are focused on current research
- provides a safe and supportive structure for all to inspect their practices and results of the learning (p. 2)

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

While protocols can vary in purpose and process, they ultimately provide a clear and transparent structure that promotes conversation among colleagues. Allen and Blythe (2004) suggest that while protocols may appear simple on the surface, they are in reality quite complex. They explain that protocols are designed to 'help configure – not script – an experience through which individuals and the group as a whole can learn' (p. 10). McDonald and colleagues (2015) suggest that protocols 'force transparency by segmenting elements of a conversation whose boundaries often blur' (p. 7). Protocols make positive feedback credible and constructive feedback tolerable. They help members of a PLC to engage in deep and sometimes challenging dialogue; listen meaningfully to others' opinions; and take action if required.

**USING PROTOCOLS IN A COLLABORATIVE TEAM**

Building a PLC requires teams of educators to engage in ongoing reflective conversations about student learning and teacher practice. In these conversations, educators must consider the instructional decisions they have made and examine factors that affect these decisions. By participating in such conversations, educators develop cognitive dispositions that they might not have been able to develop working in isolation.

The implementation of protocols ensures that focused conversations become the norm and 'individuals become skilful in learning together' (Glaude 2011, p. 2). Protocols encourage educators to take charge of their learning by using inside perspectives from their own and their colleagues' reflections to build shared understandings of practice. Some protocols also incorporate outside sources of information – such as professional readings – to aid colleagues to access, understand and adjust practices according to expert opinions (McDonald et al. 2015). Ultimately, protocols leverage the knowledge and experience of educators to solve their own problems and build their professional practices in collaboration with their colleagues. Protocols provide a clear process to elicit our tacit knowledge – the intuitive knowledge that is grounded in context and experience – and reflect on and sometimes challenge current thinking using a safe and meaningful structure.

**Choosing the right protocol to suit your purpose**

There is an abundance of protocols available for educators to use in collaborative teams. Some protocols support collaborative teams to work through problems of practice, while others aid in the analysis of student work samples and data. Choosing an appropriate protocol to suit the purpose is essential to success.

When considering what protocol would suit your purpose, it is important to contemplate aspects such as number of participants, time available, resources required and, most importantly, what outcome is expected. Some protocols can be easily administered in a short amount

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of time with little resources or preparation. Others require careful planning and preparation. Simply implementing a protocol in an ad hoc manner may not lead to improved dialogue and reflection among colleagues. Instead, educators should consider the purpose of their focus and the products they want to develop, and then identify a process that will enable them to meet their goals. For example, a team of teachers may want to focus on improving the ways they resolve issues in their team. They want a relative short protocol that they can use and trust whenever they come up against issues that require careful and strategic problem-solving. They could use the Peeling the Onion Protocol (McDonald et al. 2015) discussed later in this chapter to assist their team in dealing with problems or conflict that arise as a natural part of the change process.

**Implementing protocols with fidelity**

One important aspect of protocols is to trust the process. When teams begin to use protocols, they can sometimes feel artificial and clumsy because they disrupt the natural flow of conversation. However, this disturbance is intentional. Protocols are designed to turn natural conversations into structured, highly reflective dialogues that create time for talking and listening, provide boundaries to restrict judgement and disrespectful behaviours, and afford opportunities for both individual and group learning to occur (Allen & Blythe 2004). Regular practice is therefore essential.

When initially implementing protocols, there is a tendency for collaborative teams to divert from the original guidelines or steps and replace them with more natural dialogue. While this natural dialogue may be effective, all too often it can lead to unproductive results. Interruptions, distractions, dominance by some team members or lack of participation by others may ultimately affect the outcomes – as too may the lack of evidence to support thinking. It is therefore important to implement protocols with fidelity and accuracy to the guidelines. One way to support this implementation is to appoint a facilitator to the process.

**Role of facilitator when implementing the protocol**

A facilitator's role is to maintain commitment and support colleagues to believe in the protocol's capacity to create a space where group members can learn together (Allen & Blythe 2004). At the heart of the role of the facilitator, then, is the ability and skill to support participation and success through equity and trusting relationships (McDonald et al. 2015). Facilitators should be firm but supportive in protocol implementation by encouraging full participation and ensuring that all members of the team feel respected and safe as they participate. This means helping colleagues to understand the purpose, process and products of the protocol and creating an environment where all members are responsible and accountable for the team's actions.

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

At times, the facilitator may be required to encourage a member to participate more or suggest that another member listens more attentively to others. A facilitator may be required to guide conversations by providing prompts, connecting ideas or paraphrasing responses to ensure clarity is achieved by all. Often, a facilitator will need to open and conclude the protocol.

McDonald and colleagues (2015) suggest facilitators should aim to support team members to contribute early and in ways that will connect all members to the focus of the conversation. This ensures uncomfortable silences and dominant behaviours are not present from the beginning. They also suggest that facilitators close protocols by considering three questions (p. 20):

- **WHAT?** What have I learnt about the topic that brought this team together?
- **SO WHAT?** What difference does it seem to make – for example, to my teaching or my team's planning?
- **NOW WHAT?** What steps can I take to make the most of what I have learned?

While the role of the facilitator is significant to the success of the protocol, it is important for all members of the team to understand that the protocol is not a solution but instead a practice that, over time, can be harnessed and embedded in regular conversations.

### PROTOCOLS THAT AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS ARE USING IN PLCS

Australian schools transforming into PLCs are successfully implementing a range of protocols to support learning dialogue. Below, we briefly explore how four of the more common protocols can be adopted by teams to support clear and effective conversations about student learning. These protocols are as follows:

- Tuning Protocol
- Peeling the Onion Protocol
- Three Levels of Text Protocol
- Looking at Data Protocol

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC**Tuning Protocol**

The Tuning Protocol (McDonald et al. 2015) is a facilitated process that aids educators to share and discuss student work. Typically, a member of the team shares student work with the team members without interruption from colleagues. Team members then have time to examine the work, ask clarifying questions and provide feedback that is both supportive (warm) and challenging (cool). The presenter has the opportunity to address the feedback and debrief about the process. The role of the facilitator is to encourage all team members to be respectful listeners and contributors to the dialogue. An example of the Tuning Protocol is opposite, although many schools have made adaptations to suit their purposes.

Frequently, schools in Australia have used the Tuning Protocol to help determine whether students have learnt what they have been taught. Using students' work samples, teams of teachers reflect on and analyse the student responses to determine whether teaching and learning has been successful. In employing the Tuning Protocol, teams use highly reflective conversations and evidence of student learning to monitor and check the effectiveness of teacher practice.

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

**TUNING PROTOCOL**

The Tuning Protocol takes 45 minutes to an hour or more. The guidelines below are for an hour-long session, which is common. Usually 6–12 participants are involved, though the protocol is sometimes used by groups as large as 30. Presenters might share relevant supporting materials, which may include documents in paper or video format.

**Steps**

- a. INTRODUCTION.** The facilitator briefly introduces the protocol goals and norms and distributes a copy of the steps. (5 minutes)
- b. PRESENTATION.** The presenter shares the problem, or a draft of a plan currently under development, and provides relevant information about efforts to date. The presenter may also highlight particular questions that he or she would like the respondents to address, drawing on documents as appropriate to support the presentation. During this step, respondents may not speak. (15 minutes)
- c. RESPONSE.** Respondents note their warm and cool reactions to what the presenter has said. Warm reactions emphasise the strength of the presenter's views of the problem and his or her particular approaches to solving it. Cool reactions emphasise problematic aspects of these. Often cool reactions come in the form of questions: 'I'm wondering why you chose to ...' or 'I'm curious about your interpretation of the parental reaction. Could you say more?' During this step, the presenter may not speak. He or she is encouraged instead to take notes, and in the process to consider which responses to comment on and which to let pass. In some versions of the Tuning Protocol, participants are invited to offer warm reactions first, then cool. In other versions, participants are encouraged to mix warm and cool (though never in the same response). (15 minutes)
- d. REACTION.** The presenter reacts to any responses he or she chooses to react to. The presenter is reminded that the response is not meant to answer questions but to talk about her or his thinking. During this step, respondents may not speak. (10 minutes)
- e. CONVERSATION.** Presenter and respondents engage in open conversation. (10 minutes)
- f. DEBRIEFING.** Participants reflect on the process and explore ways to use the protocol in other situations. The facilitator may ask, 'How did it feel hearing warm and cool feedback? How did it feel not being able to respond to the feedback? How can you apply this protocol in your ordinary work?' (5 minutes)

Adapted from McDonald et al. (2015, pp. 28–29)

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC**Peeling the Onion Protocol**

Solving problems is an ongoing issue for any collaborative team. The various opinions, perspectives and experiences of a diverse range of team members are what make for successful collaboration, but they can also be the cause of unresolved conflict. Using problem-solving protocols such as Peeling the Onion (McDonald et al. 2015) encourages teams to frame problems for collaborative review.

Peeling the Onion is a structured method that supports educators as they solve problems collaboratively. The protocol helps colleagues peel away the layers of a problem so that they can get to the crux of the issue. The role of the facilitator is important in this protocol, as people have a natural tendency to offer solutions instead of gradually unpacking the problem. The facilitator must ensure that participants listen, reflect and pose questions instead of suggesting resolutions. An example of the Peeling the Onion Protocol is opposite.

In collaborative teams, educators have used this protocol and others similar to it when dealing with a range of challenges. At times, the challenge at hand may be a personal issue that is based on the relationships within the team, but more often the focus is on working through problems of practice in teaching and learning. Educators commonly use such protocols to identify teaching strategies that they can implement to support students who are having difficulties with learning.

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

**PEELING THE ONION**

The protocol takes approximately 40 minutes and is best for a group of 10–12 members.

**Steps**

- a. SHARING THE PROBLEM.** Someone agrees to share a problem that he or she needs help with. (5 minutes)
- b. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS.** Only clarifying questions may be asked – ones that elicit brief additional explanation. (3 minutes)
- c. ACTIVE LISTENING.** The facilitator leads a go-round in which everyone completes the statement: ‘I understand the problem to be ...’ The presenter stays silent and takes notes. (10 minutes)
- d. PEELING/PROBING.** The facilitator leads another go-round in which everyone gets to pose additional questions raised by having heard the first round. (10 minutes)
- e. RESPONSE.** The facilitator invites a response from the presenter as follows: ‘Having heard these questions, please share any new thoughts about the problem you presented.’ (5 minutes)
- f. OPEN CONVERSATION.** The group is invited to have an open conversation. (5 minutes)
- g. DEBRIEFING.** The facilitator prompts: ‘How was this like peeling an onion? What other “onions” do you imagine peeling?’ (2 minutes)

Adapted from McDonald et al. (2015, p. 37)

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC**Three Levels of Text Protocol**

Professional reading is an important part of educator learning. By engaging in professional reading, educators can connect with new ideas, identify the latest research and reflect on their practices in comparison with those of others. Engaging in professional reading with colleagues is a supportive and worthwhile activity as it gives teachers the space and time to deeply engage with the main ideas in the professional reading. The Three Levels of Text Protocol (Brown Easton 2009) supports teams of teachers to collaboratively construct meaning and to clarify and extend their thinking about a reading.

The Three Levels of Text Protocol encourages participants to read short sections of a text and highlight key words, phrases and sentences. Then, with the support of a facilitator, participants share these connections by explaining their importance. A whole-team discussion follows in which team members discuss what these main ideas mean for their practice. The protocol concludes with a debrief. An example of the Three Levels of Text Protocol is opposite.

Collaborative teams in Australia are using protocols like the Three Levels of Text Protocol when researching and inquiring into best practice. Educators are constantly barraged with ideas, strategies and activities, but many of these ideas are not created according to an evidence-based instructional model. Educators in collaborative teams constantly question, critique and inquire into best practice to ensure that the opportunities they provide their students are the best possible practices that will lead to high levels of learning. A protocol such as Three Levels of Text has supported educators to identify effective assessment practices and understand complex instructional approaches. In reading and discussing such issues in a collaborative team environment, shared understandings are built and resources and strategies are critiqued before implementation occurs.

## COMMITMENT 5: Create clarity in collaboration

**THREE LEVELS OF TEXT PROTOCOL**

The ideal group size is 6–10 participants, so if the whole group is larger, it should be broken into subgroups. There is no presenter in this protocol, but there should be a facilitator. It is also helpful to have a recorder who will chart what people say.

This protocol can be done in a few as 20 minutes, and can be extended for as long as there is time. In fact, the protocol should be extended if the text being examined is long and complex or if there are more than 10 people in a group. The suggested times below are based on a 45-minute session.

**Steps**

- a. INTRODUCING THE TEXT.** This step may occur before the participants meet or at the beginning of the session. Participants read, view or listen to the text and take notes. (Time depends on length and complexity of text)
- b. SENTENCES.** Each member of the group selects a sentence that he or she finds significant from the text (if the text is written) or from notes (if the text is aural or visual). The other participants listen and take notes on what each person says, but there is no discussion. (10 minutes)
- c. PHRASES.** Each member of the group selects a phrase that he or she finds significant from the text (if the text is written) or from notes (if the text is aural or visual). The other participants listen and take notes on what each person says, but there is no discussion. (10 minutes)
- d. WORDS.** Each member of the group selects a word that he or she finds significant from the text (if the text is written) or from notes (if the text is aural or visual). The other participants listen and take notes on what each person says, but there is no discussion. (10 minutes)
- e. DISCUSSION.** Participants discuss what they heard and what they've learned about the text being studied. (10 minutes)
- f. DEBRIEFING.** The group debriefs the process. (5 minutes)

Adapted from Brown Easton (2009, p. 62)

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC**Looking at Data Protocol**

Collaborative teams use data to improve learning. Teams of teachers use this data to respond and monitor the success of teaching, learning and leadership. However, analysing data isn't always an easy process. It requires patience, organisation and, most importantly, the time and resources to respond to the findings.

The Looking at Data Protocol (McDonald et al. 2015) guides teams of educators to analyse student data and identify the strengths and challenges of practice. The protocol begins by inviting participants to identify the facts associated with the data without engaging in collaborative conversation. After the facts have been identified, the facilitator supports the team to dig deeper by offering additional thoughts about the data and providing evidence. Following this, participants identify strengths and problems using the data and conclude by offering recommendations for addressing the data. An example of the Looking at Data Protocol is opposite.

Australian collaborative teams are using the Looking at Data Protocol for a range of purposes. The protocol is utilised when schools are working on their mission and vision. Using large data sets such as NAPLAN and parent and student opinion surveys, educators can identify priorities for the school and set directions for further attention. The protocol also helps schools monitor progress towards goals that have been previously set and engage in reflection, redirection and celebration through analysis.





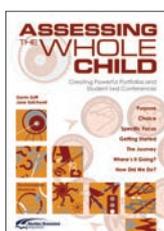




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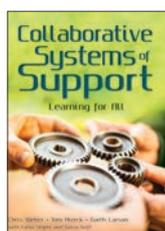
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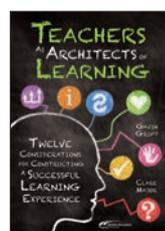
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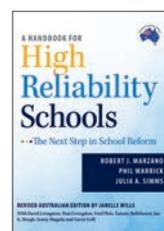
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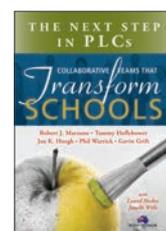
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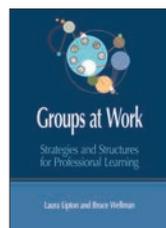
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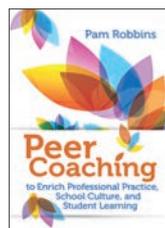
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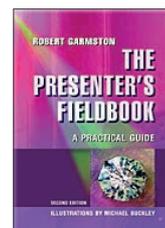
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