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Session 3

5 Commitments for Leading a PLC

MELBOURNE

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C O M M I T M E N T 1

Understand what it means to be a PLC

A professional learning community is a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within, between and across schools that will directly benefit learners.

– Alma Harris and Michelle Jones (2010, p. 173)

As more and more PLCs are established within schools across Australia, the first priority of school leaders is to develop an understanding of why and how this approach provides the best results when it comes to whole-school improvement. In striving to build an understanding of the process and purpose of a PLC, Australian schools can take the first of many steps on the PLC journey towards achieving high levels of learning for all students.

KEY ACTIONS

Three key actions are essential to understanding what it means to be a PLC:

- **ACTION 1.1:** Understand the purpose of a PLC
- **ACTION 1.2:** Understand the PLC process
- **ACTION 1.3:** Understand where professional learning sits within the PLC context

C O M M I T M E N T 2

Find the courage you need to lead

The courage to lead is forged when something personally meaningful is at stake for you and for those in your sphere of influence. The vision must really matter to you ... Courageous leadership action comes from your commitment to your deeply held beliefs about the issue.

– Timothy D. Kanold (2011, p. 40)

In reference to urban education, Pfeffer (2007) once described improving student achievement as a hill to be climbed:

People have built quite successful careers – describing the hill, measuring the hill, walking around the hill, taking pictures of the hill, and so forth. Sooner or later, somebody needs to actually climb the hill. (p. 137)

In our view, leading a PLC can also be described as a hill to climb – although given the challenges involved, some may maintain that PLC leadership would be better termed a *mountain* to climb. Indeed, the following are just some of the difficulties that leaders face when it comes to transforming a school into a PLC:

- to release ownership over the collective inquiry to all the members of the learning community and resist the temptation to take control of the process
- to promote mutual responsibility for moving the inquiry process forward and resist the temptation to provide solutions
- to embrace conflict as a way to solve problems while resisting the temptation to advocate personal preferences
- to articulate and model a clear understanding of collaborative inquiry and resist the temptation to revert to quick fixes
- to lead a learning culture and resist the temptation to leave learning-centred leadership to others

Just like climbing a mountain, the notion of transforming a school into a high-performing PLC can seem daunting and overwhelming. Many questions enter our heads: 'Where do I

begin? Where is the correct path? How long will it take? What if I fail or get lost?' Like mountain-climbing, the commitment to lead a PLC requires the strong belief that the effort is worth it – that the summit will unveil new vistas, and that we will be rewarded when we reach our ultimate goal.

Commitment 2 in the PLC transformation incorporates the ideas of several thought leaders within the field of leadership. In particular, it draws upon the work of Robert Marzano, whose highly acclaimed life's work has been dedicated to the study of effective teaching and leadership. Marzano has concluded that the best environment for great teaching and leadership is a powerful PLC (DuFour & Marzano 2011), and he provides compelling evidence that can help to guide leaders through the important journey of school transformation.

KEY ACTIONS

To explain Commitment 2, we will outline three key actions:

- **ACTION 2.1:** Find the courage to challenge convention
- **ACTION 2.2:** Find the courage to commit to growth
- **ACTION 2.3:** Find the courage to focus on what works

C O M M I T M E N T 3

Build a climate of trust

Transformation begins with trust. Trust is the essential link between leaders and led, vital to people's job satisfaction and loyalty, vital to followership. It is doubly important when organisations are seeking rapid improvement, which requires exceptional effort and competence, and doubly again to organisations like schools that offer few extrinsic motivators (money, status, power). And it is as fragile as it is precious; once damaged, it is nearly impossible to repair.

– Robert Evans (1996, p. 183)

Central to the transformation of a school into a PLC is the establishment of a culture that centres on trust. Building trust in a PLC requires leaders to take deliberate actions that are intimately linked to the core work of achieving high levels of learning for all students. In our discussion of Commitment 3, we will outline some of the high-leverage actions that effective PLC leaders take to create a climate of relational trust within their organisations.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) explain relational trust in the following way:

A complex web of social exchanges conditions the basic operations of schools. Embedded in the daily social routines of schools is an interrelated set of mutual dependencies among all key actors: students, teachers, principals and administrators, and parents. These structural dependencies create feelings of vulnerability for the individuals involved ... Relational trust views the social exchanges of schooling as organised around a distinct set of role relationships: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their school principal. Each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role obligations and holds some expectations about the role obligations of the other. (p. 20)

Given that so much of a PLC's success is dependent on the willingness of school staff to de-privatise their practice with one another, it follows that without high levels of relational trust, it will be effectively impossible to build a network of high-functioning collaborative teams. Conversely, as Covey (2004) writes, 'when the trust account is high, communication

is easy, instant, and effective' (p. 188). One of the critical commitments that PLC leaders must make is to understand the importance of trust in a collaborative culture and build the necessary conditions for trust to flourish.

Collaborative teams are the bedrock of PLCs, so let us consider for a moment the work that these teams undertake. Teams of teachers get together on a regular basis to analyse data related to the impact their teaching has had on student learning. Now, imagine that you are a teacher on this team, and the results you bring to the table are the lowest in terms of student achievement. It is likely that you would want to be in an environment where your colleagues had your best interests at heart, and where the focus was not on you as an individual but rather on the collective responsibility for ensuring that all students learn.

As this example demonstrates, working within a safe psychological space in which we can share openly our successes and failures, fears and hopes and strengths and weaknesses is paramount to determining whether a PLC culture will thrive or merely survive. Building relationships in the absence of trust is a bit like driving a car without fuel: you can sit in the vehicle for as long as you like, but it's not going to take you very far.

KEY ACTIONS

To explicate Commitment 3, we will outline three key actions that leaders need to support in order to successfully build trust between all the key stakeholders in a PLC:

- **ACTION 3.1:** Build behaviours that promote trust
- **ACTION 3.2:** Build bridges to repair trust
- **ACTION 3.3:** Build authenticity to model trust

C O M M I T M E N T 4

Shape school structures for success

Without ... structures that promote continual learning, it is impossible to build a professional learning community.

– Hipp and Huffman (2003)

The transformation from school to PLC demands significant attention to *structures* – the organisational elements that make up a school – since structures support schools to run efficiently. When appropriate structures and processes are established, the environment required for a PLC to be effective is maintained. In contrast, when organisational supports are missing or weak, the result can be disorganisation, unclear direction, limited time, haphazard processes and a sense of fragmentation. Under such conditions, educators can become frustrated and the journey can stall. A lack of attention to organisational structures in a PLC can cause a disconnect between the stated mission of the school and the actions that educators can actually take to improve practice.

Progress in a PLC is impossible without the implementation of structures to support the work being done. Structural modifications are therefore critical in terms of establishing a strong foundation on which a successful PLC can grow and develop.

KEY ACTIONS

To explain Commitment 4 we will outline three key actions required of leaders to shape school structures so that solid roots are provided for the school's transformation to a PLC:

- **ACTION 4.1:** Connect structures and culture
- **ACTION 4.2:** Change structures through school leadership
- **ACTION 4.3:** Cultivate structures for a high-performing PLC

C O M M I T M E N T 5

Create clarity in collaboration

A lack of clarity could put the brakes on any journey to success.

– Steve Maraboli (2014, p. 38)

Every day, students behave in ways that will impact their learning. Every day, educators make decisions that will affect their teaching. And every day, leaders in schools act in ways that will influence their staff's practices, motivations and attitudes. What we don't often scrutinise in these seemingly effortless decisions is why some behaviours are successful and why others are not.

Our experience has taught us that while many factors impact success, it is essential to understand what you want to achieve, the steps required to achieve it and the ways you will monitor when you have achieved it. It is through this clarity that powerful behaviours are developed.

PLCs engage in a relentless pursuit to understand, with clarity, what impacts on their core business of learning. Clarity helps all stakeholders in schools build the culture and structures required to ensure that all learning is at high levels. The importance of aligning culture and structures has been discussed in this book (see Commitment 4), but cultural and structural changes will not improve results unless all stakeholders know exactly – that is, with precision and clarity – what and how they will go about achieving goals that are related to the culture they are trying to achieve. Commitment 5 focuses specifically on how school leaders can harness the power of clarity to both create and communicate the cultural and structural changes that are required to ensure that the PLC transformation is a systematic and ongoing process of school improvement.

Clarity for the transformational leader in a PLC is as important as the windows and mirrors on a car. These features allow us to see what's approaching, what's around us and where we've already been. By being clear on what is coming up, understanding the current reality and reflecting upon the journey so far, a PLC leader is empowered to take the actions required to arrive at the destination of high levels of learning for all students.

KEY ACTIONS

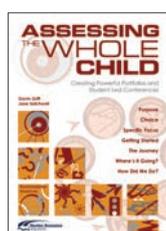
To explain Commitment 5 we will outline three key actions leaders require to ensure they create clarity in their school's transformation to a PLC:

- **ACTION 5.1:** Create clarity for shared understanding
- **ACTION 5.2:** Create clarity of purpose, process and product
- **ACTION 5.3:** Create clarity through protocols

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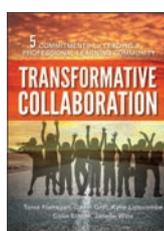
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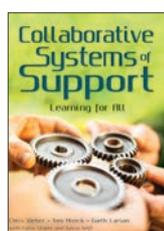
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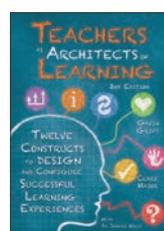
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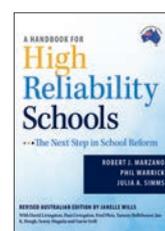
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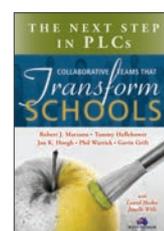
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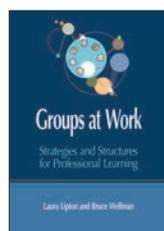
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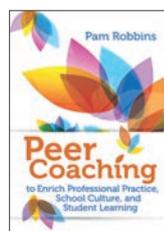
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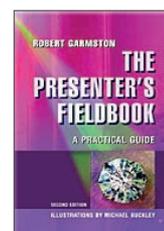
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