

FACILITATING TEACHER TEAMS AND AUTHENTIC PLCs

The Human Side of Leading People, Protocols, and Practices

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
Venablistms: Non-Slogans of Facilitating Authentic PLCs	4
Part 1: The Human Side of Facilitating Teachers and Teacher Teams	5
1. Facilitation Essentials	7
2. Building Trust and Buy-In	19
3. Facilitation 201	38
4. Navigating Difficult Waters	51
Part 2: Facilitating Tasks of Authentic PLCs	61
5. Three Power Tools for Facilitating PLC Discussions	63
6. Facilitating Text-Based Discussions	73
7. Facilitating Discussions Surrounding Student and Teacher Work	82
8. Facilitating Discussions of Data	99
9. Facilitating Discussions Surrounding a Teacher or Team Dilemma	105
10. Facilitating Collaborative Planning Time	118
Appendix of Protocols and Tools	130
Bibliography	155
Index	157
About the Author	160

understanding as well as their readiness for the next thing. Such is also true of PLC facilitators.

Developing this finely tuned awareness and acting on it accordingly may seem to be a daunting task, but with the aid of this book and some practice, it will become second nature. In the meantime, ask yourself, “What do my team members need *right now* to move forward in their knowledge, understanding, and readiness?” It’s not terribly different from what master teachers ask themselves during classroom instruction.

What’s in This Book

Facilitating Teacher Teams and Authentic PLCs is divided into two parts: “Facilitating Teachers and Teacher Teams” and “Facilitating Tasks of Authentic PLCs.” In Part 1, I discuss the human side of facilitating PLCs—that is, facilitating the people in them—and provide the skill set necessary to do it effectively. In Part 2, I offer targeted guidance in facilitating specific protocols and activities typically used in PLC work. Because each protocol has its own nuances and potential pitfalls, I designed Part 2 as a “preemptive strike” to help facilitators anticipate and address the obstacles and jams that commonly pop up during use of the protocols. Part 2 also provides tips for making each protocol the richest possible experience for the teacher team. To enhance facilitation, many of the tools and protocols described throughout this book appear in full in the Appendix. In addition, you can access some of these resources at <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Venables2017forms.pdf>.

There are many ideas in this book that require no direct action; they are there to inform the reader and raise awareness of the salient aspects of navigating the interpersonal waters of leading a team of teachers. In other cases, reading is informative but insufficient; some things need to be practiced with teachers in a real live PLC. There is a third type of information in the book that may not require direct practice but can best be understood and internalized through discussion with other teacher leaders. As you will see in Chapter 3, I refer to this practice as *constructing community knowledge*.

The Vignettes

Throughout this book, you will find short vignettes that offer additional clarity and insight into the nuances of facilitation. Each “Fly on the Wall” section includes a narrative describing a scene from a fictional PLC’s meeting, with footnotes providing brief analyses of particular points of interest. I suggest that when you are reading the text with colleagues (for example, in a book study), you first read the scene

without looking at the footnotes. Then discuss why you think various parts of the vignette have been highlighted for analysis. After this discussion, read the footnotes and see where your thinking and understanding align with my own.

Venablisms

First of all, this is not my term; that would be really haughty. This appellation was coined by several participants at a Grapple Institute who observed that I uttered certain truisms over and over again in an effort to highlight any area where they applied. A broken record, me. The Grapple participants compiled a list and called them “Venablisms.” I include them in this book not because I was flattered (although I was), but because they are *that* important. Each of these tenets is of paramount importance and gets at the heart of leading teams. (The only one the Grapple participants missed—no doubt because I say it in jest—happens to apply to the rest of the list: *Bumper stickers and T-shirts should be issued.*)

A Note on Terms and Titles

Although the terms *PLC* and *teacher team* are not synonymous—it is possible for a school to have teacher teams that would not, by my definition, constitute PLCs—I nonetheless use the words interchangeably for simplicity and clarity. In a similar way, I use the titles *leader*, *facilitator*, and *coach* interchangeably to refer to those who lead PLCs in their schools.

There Is Learning in the Balance

Lest we forget, as we spend untold hours working with adults, that it is the students who are the primary benefactors of our labor, here’s a reminder: this work is about kids. Teachers in a PLC have the right and responsibility to throw the *What does this have to do with student learning?* flag whenever our discussions veer off track.

Indeed, in all of our work together, we must constantly remind ourselves and one another that ***there is learning in the balance.*** The quality of the decisions we make and the swiftness with which we make them greatly affect the education of our students. Time is ticking away for *these* students in *our* charge *this* year as we wait for 100 percent buy-in, or postpone a sensible initiative until next year, or avoid having hard conversations with an ineffective teacher, or make choices that are convenient for us rather than right for the learning of our children.

This truth provides the beacon that lights our way as we make our decisions and prioritize our focus, and it provides the strength we need when we’re having the hard conversations with one another. When we truly put students at the forefront, difficult decisions become surprisingly easy to make.

VENABLISMS: NON-SLOGANS OF FACILITATING AUTHENTIC PLCS*

The epithet “Venablisms” was coined by a group of teachers attending my Grapple Institute to refer to certain things I say repeatedly throughout the three-day training. Collectively, the “non-slogans” that follow form the heart of authentic facilitation.

- Trust the process.
- This is about kids.
- Build the team before you need it.
- There is learning in the balance.
- Brave the skinny branches.
- Separate the work from the person.
- Facilitators share last.
- Do ask, don’t tell.
- Candor with care.
- Challenges precede growth.
- It’s not about where you are.
- Trust your instincts.
- At the heart of it, PLCs are a human endeavor.
- Substance with safety.
- Debrief. Debrief. Debrief.
- Do what you say you’re going to do.
- Lead the team for the team.
- Strengthen the team at every opportunity.
- Make the meeting meaningful.
- Elevate, don’t evaluate (the work).



* Each Venablism represents a core edict in facilitating authentic PLCs developed by Daniel R. Venables. Each is printed in boldface and italics wherever it appears in the text of this book, and each is the subject of a short video in a series titled *From the Human Side (of Facilitating PLCs)*. These videos will periodically be posted to www.authenticplcs.com/thehumanside.

Part 1:

The Human Side of Facilitating Teachers and Teacher Teams

When it comes down to it, facilitating our fellow teachers is an essentially human endeavor. In most cases, teachers who have been asked (or who have volunteered) to facilitate their teacher teams are colleagues, not administrators. Because they occupy the same position on the totem pole as the rest of the teachers in the PLC and have no special supervisory powers, their effectiveness as facilitators depends significantly on their relationships with their fellow team members. In fact, their leadership in the team is based on these relationships; they have no leverage other than this. Thus, the health of these relationships is paramount. Part 1 of this book accordingly addresses the essentials of facilitating colleagues, building trust and buy-in, and dealing with interpersonal obstacles.

1 | FACILITATION ESSENTIALS

Human and Social Capital

Schools used to pour all of their professional development dollars into building their *human capital*—that is, improving the quality, knowledge, and skill sets of individual teachers. The rationale was that teachers who attended conferences or participated in other professional development opportunities would return to their schools brimming with knowledge and pass their learning on to their colleagues. In many cases, however, this simply didn't happen, so the funds invested in sending a single teacher to a conference yielded relatively small returns—which led to little improvement in classroom instruction on any scale.

Today, thanks in large part to the research of Dr. Carrie Leana of the University of Pittsburgh and others, we are learning that building *social capital* is a more effective professional development strategy. In contrast to human capital, social capital refers to the quality of the interactions among teachers in a department or school. Schools with high social capital show significantly higher gains in student learning than do schools with low social capital—even when those schools have moderately low human capital. Leana writes,

When the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction—that is, when social capital is strong—student achievement scores improve. . . . We also found that even low-ability teachers can perform as well as teachers of average ability *if* they have strong social capital. Strong social capital can go a long way toward offsetting any disadvantages students face when their teachers have low human capital. (2011, pp. 33, 34)

This is not to say that schools should never bother improving their human capital; incorporating both forms of teacher professional development is ideal (Figure 1.1 offers examples of actions that promote both types of capital). If schools want to get the most bang for their professional development buck, however, they should invest heavily in developing the social capital of their teachers and teacher teams. A great

FIGURE 1.1 | Actions That Boost Social and Human Capital

Actions That Boost Social Capital	Actions That Boost Human Capital
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning together by reading articles, watching videos, and discussing findings • Training PLC facilitators to understand and deal with interpersonal team dynamics • Holding teams responsible for setting their own goals • Holding teams responsible for identifying and solving their own problems • Building PLC meeting time into the daily schedule • Instituting regular, consistent peer observations • Reflecting on goals and progress toward goals on a regular basis and celebrating successes • Fostering team dependence • Planning instruction together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending individual teachers to professional conferences • Inviting a speaker or trainer to address the faculty • Setting individualized professional goals • Depending on individual teacher action plans to support low-performing teachers • Setting up mentor teacher programs • Conducting administrative classroom observations • Holding one-on-one teacher-administrator conferences • Fostering principal dependence • Having instructional coaches

way to spike the social capital of a school is to focus priority on the school's PLCs. If the quality of teacher interactions in a school's PLCs improves, there is likely to be a commensurate gain in student learning.

Why Are PLC Facilitators Indispensable?

Although PLCs are an effective way to build social capital, not all PLCs are created equal. More specifically, ensuring effective *facilitation* of PLCs is key; simply assembling teams and sending them on their way is inadequate. As someone who works with schools throughout the United States developing authentic PLCs and training facilitators, I firmly believe that every PLC should have a person designated as the facilitator.

There are PLC models available that don't call for a facilitator. The thinking behind such models is that "we're all in this together," and their structure is based on a model of shared leadership. In theory, a teacher team that is able to facilitate itself sounds great, but I have rarely seen this model work in practice. Usually, shared

leadership in this context means no leadership at all. Discussions veer off track, time is wasted, and the focus shifts from teaching and learning to matters only tangentially, if at all, related to student learning. As a result, the growth of such a team is very slow, and anything meaningful the team achieves could have been accomplished by a facilitator-led PLC in half the time. Slow progress and a lack of focus aren't the only drawbacks of this model; more serious is what happens when interpersonal conflicts or other obstacles arise and there's no well-trained facilitator to guide the group to a resolution.

The Role of the Facilitator

A PLC facilitator's primary role is to increase and maintain the social capital in his or her teacher team. If team members are engaging in quality interactions focused on teaching and learning, then their students' achievement will improve. This job comes with many other responsibilities, including

- Guiding the team through the steps of protocols.
- Asking thought-provoking questions that challenge conventional thinking and push the discussion to a deeper level.
- Promoting and modeling honesty and respect in discussions.
- Ensuring that all voices are heard.
- Maintaining team members' emotional safety during discussions.
- Keeping the team focused and moving it forward when it's stuck.
- Mediating disagreements and helping the team navigate the sometimes-turbulent waters of interpersonal dynamics.
- Being able to step back, particularly when being emotionally drawn into a problematic group dynamic.
- Working for the good of the team.

The last bullet point touches on one of the most important responsibilities of a PLC facilitator. In 1985, when dozens of the biggest names in music came together to record the charity single "We Are the World," a sign posted outside the studio admonished the artists to "Please check your egos at the door." This sign served to remind participants that the goal of the project was to help others—not to boost egos or careers. Similarly, the Code of Ethics I share in *The Practice of Authentic PLCs* includes the credo "Leave your ego at the door, but bring your brains inside" (Venables, 2011, p. 146) to remind PLC facilitators and members alike to put aside self-interest and call their brains to the fore so that they can think deeply about the important work at hand. Our decisions, actions, and priorities must not be tainted by what serves our own egos but instead be guided by what is best for student learning.