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Preface

For almost as long as young people have been educated in schools, the adults inside their walls have searched for better ways to help students learn, while those outside school walls have critiqued their efforts and persistently called for change. The result is largely a culture of educational fads that come and go, often distracting administrators, teachers, parents, and students from the real task at hand and diverting valuable time and resources.

In recent years, numerous educational trends—from language labs, phonics, and new math to open classrooms and authentic assessment—have been researched, written about, and implemented (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) in schools across the country. While the focus of the trends has varied considerably, one thing has been remarkably consistent: Their advocates often tell educators *what* to do, but they rarely describe *how* to do it.

The current educational trend is to transform traditional school staffs into professional learning communities. A Web search on creating professional learning communities produces several million hits, the vast majority of which define what they are and justify their value and potential for change. What very few of them do, however, is give educators practical, concrete ways to establish them—specific, easy-to-follow steps they can use not only to start a professional learning community but also to sustain it over time. In other words, what is missing are the information and guidance necessary to help educators stick to their own learning path long enough to see if something works before moving on to the next innovation.

That is what this book is about. It is tied to professional learning communities because we believe they hold real promise for improving the learning of both students and educators and for encouraging continued innovation and improvement. The tools and strategies presented in it, however, will work regardless of whether a staff meets the definition of a true professional learning community or is exploring the potential of other innovations, such as schools within schools, charter schools, or schools of choice.

SECTION I

Laying the Foundation

The first section of this book includes Chapters 1 and 2, which focus exclusively on discussion skills educators need to hone both as individuals and as participants in a larger group. Simply stated, these skills are the foundation on which professional learning communities are built, a capacity they cannot do without. Every task that learning communities carry out, every decision they make, and every action they put into practice depends on the ability of members to openly share their ideas, listen respectfully and skillfully to their colleagues, and together arrive at mutually agreeable conclusions that best serve students. The success of a professional learning community, thus, depends almost entirely on its ability to have productive discussions.

Like reading for students, high-quality discussions open the door to limitless positive action and renewal for educators. Our experience, however, shows that while most group members spend considerable time talking, few are able to interact in truly effective and fruitful ways. Therefore, before asking professional learning communities to tackle the challenges in Chapters 3 through 5, we ask them to first spend time improving their discussion skills. As the road map on the following page suggests, an investment of just four months should be sufficient for an emergent learning community to achieve an adequate level of competence. Of course, this time frame could be reduced if members are willing to omit breaks and work in between whole-group meetings.

How long it will take to achieve a level of mastery is another question. We believe that successful group interactions require continuing practice,

PRACTICE EXERCISES 1–3

With the results of the self-assessment in hand, the group will have a better sense of where it stands in terms of its ability to conduct productive discussions. Then, in light of its identified strengths and weaknesses, the group can embark upon the series of exercises, described below, to hone individual skills.

For each exercise, the group will need to choose a topic of concern and consequence in the realm of schoolwide approaches to teaching and learning or student discipline. Such topics should be of equal concern to all—teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff—to increase the chances of creating a level playing field. Each exercise should take no more than an hour, so it should be possible to conduct one at any given staff meeting.

Exercise 1 Advocating, Listening, and Affirming

Rationale

Our assumption is that participants are most familiar with advocacy as a discussion function, since we tend to be quite skilled at presenting our own positions. In the case of listening and affirming, however, familiarity might be a stretch as there is relatively little of either in most discussions we have observed.

For the most part, participants listen only superficially or intermittently. Instead, they concentrate on the conflicts raging inside their own heads about what is being said or are so intent on preparing their next statement that they are unable to concentrate on and evaluate someone else's contributions.

Similarly, with regard to affirming, it is fair to say that we are naturally inclined toward the value and wisdom of our own ideas and opinions rather than someone else's, yet in a productive discussion, there is considerable value added when one person honors the contribution of another by affirming and building on it. As a result, this exercise—which is designed to help discussants become as skilled at listening and affirming as they are at advocating—is likely to present a worthy challenge.

(Continued)