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Chapter 1

A New Way to Lead Schools

Discussions about leadership can be much like discussions about religion: almost everyone speaks about both topics with a high degree of certainty in his or her views. Agreement about specific points and their implications for behavior is frequently lacking, however. So rather than advocate for a specific definition of leadership, we believe it is much more beneficial to describe the behaviors we have observed in leaders of professional learning communities and then to explore the effects that those leadership behaviors have on organizational development—for better or for worse. As we reflect on these behaviors, and more specifically, on the underlying, sometimes hidden assumptions that guide those behaviors, we become more conscious of the foundations of our daily work.

What we know above all is that the traditional ways of leading schools are inadequate when it comes to reculturing districts and schools into high-performing professional learning communities. The old ways of leading schools are simply not good enough anymore. Think about it: gone are the days when we assumed that just because a principal has completed a program in school administration, he or she has become magically ready to create and lead a high-performing school. And yet, although we know leadership requires more complex skills and training, year after year district leaders continue to hire principals and send them out into schools with little direction or support, as if to say, “Shoo, shoo—go lead!”

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As we share our views regarding a new way to lead, we recognize that behaviors are, to a great extent, a result of the assumptions we hold. The leadership practices described in this book are based on the following basic assumptions we hold about leaders and leadership behaviors that can have a huge impact on the reculturing of districts and schools into high-performing professional learning communities.

PLC Is *the* Initiative to Ensure Student Learning

Our primary assumption is that the professional learning community model offers our best hope for ensuring high levels of learning for all students. This belief drives what effective leaders of professional learning communities do, how they think, and how they feel.

Acting on this belief requires that leaders go far beyond simply endorsing the PLC concept; they must gain a deep, rich understanding of what professional learning communities are, how they differ from traditional schools, and how they work. They must proactively *lead* the work of reculturing their district or school into a high-performing professional learning community, and they must lead with passion and persistence!

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This energy and passion are necessary to convince educators that the PLC model will work. Traditional school culture reflects a focus on things that are beyond the control of faculty, staff, and students: prior knowledge, school funding, and so on. This focus on what we can't change leads to frustra-

tion and the shifting of responsibility, but does nothing to improve student learning.

However, some aspects of district and school culture *can* be changed—and have been shown to have a strong correlation with improved student learning. Leaders in professional learning communities ensure that the conversations, decisions, and the work reflect a focus on aspects of school culture that can be changed and that will make an impact (see fig. 1.1).

Many leaders base their leadership behavior on the assumption that the most effective way to improve schools is by implementing hot new initiatives. In district after district, school after school, they can be observed frantically implementing whatever is new, whatever the district next door is doing, one initiative after the other. The goal is to do, do, and do more. Rarely do they stick with anything long enough to see if it's getting results. Often the only results they're paying attention



Chapter 2

Articulating a Moral Purpose

The challenge facing leaders who seek to reculture their districts into high-performing professional learning communities is not convincing faculty and staff that ensuring high levels of learning is an admirable and worthwhile mission. The idea that a district should seek to ensure high levels of learning for all students is hardly controversial, and it is highly unlikely that a group of faculty or staff will start a petition in opposition to learning! In fact, the inherent danger is that our mission is so common sense, it risks becoming a cliché. Rather, the challenge is *how to articulate this moral purpose in such a way that it will cause everyone to question and align his or her existing attitudes, commitments, and behaviors*. In other words, the challenge is how to embed the learning mission into the day-to-day culture throughout the district.

Most faculty and staff are willing to work hard and go above and beyond what typically might be expected—if they believe the purpose is worthwhile. This is why it is critical that district leaders go to extraordinary lengths to articulate the district’s fundamental mission and moral purpose.

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Leaders must continually draw everyone’s attention to the *why* question—why we are doing what we’re doing—and this *why* must always put students and their learning, the very reason schools exist, at the center of our work.

We urge district leaders to think of their mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students as fulfilling a sacred promise. Each morning parents

literally hand over their children to us! In our experience, parents expect three things in return: (1) they want their children to be safe and secure while in our care, (2) they want them to feel special, and (3) they want them to learn—not simply to be taught, but to learn! We have the highest obligation to fulfill this promise, and everything we do in schools—every decision, every policy, every practice—should reflect this. What we do sends a much more significant message than what we say. A district that sets out on a journey to ensure high levels of learning for all students must examine everything, screen every practice, by asking, “Is this consistent with our core purpose of ensuring high levels of learning for all students?”

Perhaps the single most important thing about articulating a moral purpose is that we cannot wait until everyone is convinced. We must believe, deep in our souls, that focusing intensely and passionately on ensuring high levels of learning for all students is the *right* thing to do. Since there is virtually unanimous agreement among researchers and practitioners regarding the power of professional learning community practices to improve student learning (see DuFour et al., 2008), we believe it’s simply unethical to ignore such a compelling body of evidence. It is the district leaders’ job to implement the best available concepts and practices in order to positively impact student learning, and to that end, leaders cannot allow individual naysayers to opt out of the work or hold an entire district hostage, keeping faculty and staff from doing the right things for the right reasons. Even those who aren’t particularly motivated by the moral purpose of ensuring student learning would have to agree that at a very minimum they are being paid to implement best practices in their school or classroom in order to improve student learning. Effective leaders work to appeal to educators’ intrinsic motivation to serve students, however, knowing that the journey to become a professional learning community will require more commitment than a mere paycheck can buy.

Start With the School Board

Since the legal authority and responsibility for local public education rest with school boards, begin by ensuring your board understands the fundamental concepts and practices of professional learning communities and, more importantly, *why* it is important to implement PLC practices: to ensure that all students learn at high levels. Make clear that the work of the district must focus on achieving this result not just in one school, or a few schools, but in *all* schools. School board members receive a barrage of questions from the community, and they need to be informed so that they can help explain what’s happening. As you form your guiding coalition, make working with the school board a top priority.

What Effective Teams Do

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and use team norms. • Clarify and add meaning to state or provincial standards and district power standards. • Clarify what standards look like in student work. • Develop and utilize common pacing guides. • Develop common formative assessments. • Develop common scoring rubrics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor results by collaboratively analyzing student learning (work and assessments). • Connect student learning to appropriate interventions or enrichment. • Work collaboratively to improve their individual instructional practices. • Work collaboratively to improve team effectiveness. • Improve student learning.
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School: _____ Team: _____

Narrative Analysis of Team Effectiveness

Team Next Steps for School Year _____

Support That Will Be Provided to the Team

Figure 5.5: Team effectiveness monitoring form for principals and team leaders.

Source: White River School District. Used with permission.

If interventions from both Tier 1 and Tier 2 fail, the team will need much more direct and radical help: Tier 3 interventions. Perhaps the principal will meet with the team regularly and direct that certain things occur. Perhaps the principal will need to name a new team leader or reconfigure the makeup of the team. In White River, principals were expected to take ownership for the effectiveness of each team within their school and, in a systematic, timely, and direct way, ensure and enhance the effectiveness of each team.

Figure 5.6 depicts examples of the kinds of interventions that can be useful in enhancing team effectiveness. We have found the pyramid to be useful for district leaders to engage principals and team leaders in a collaborative process that leads to the development of their own plan for providing additional time and support for teams that experience difficulty.

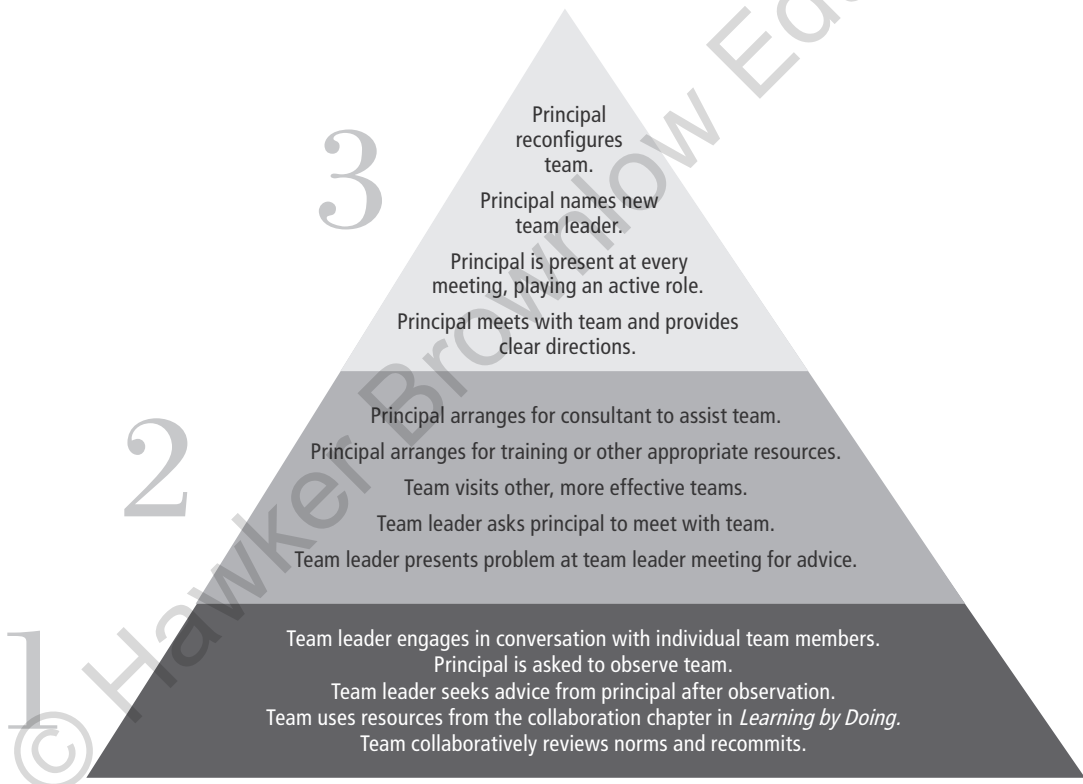


Figure 5.6: Sample pyramid of interventions for collaborative teams.

Source: White River School District. Used with permission.