

Professional Learning
Communities at
Work and

Virtual Collaboration

*On the Tipping Point of
Transformation*

RICHARD DUFOUR
CASEY REASON



Table of Contents

About the Authors	ix
Introduction	1
The Potential of PLCs to Redefine a Profession	2
Technology as a Catalyst for Improvement	3
Technology as an Accelerating Force	5
Meeting the Challenges of Contemporary Times	7
The Learning Ahead: Chapter Overview	9
Conclusion	11
Chapter 1: Examining the Past to Understand the Present	13
A Quick Definition	14
School Improvement Efforts	16
Traditional School Culture	17
A Gradual Shift in School Culture	18
The Rise of PLCs	20
The Problem With PLCs	22
The Impact of Technology in the Classroom	24
Understanding Virtual Teams	29

Benefits and Challenges of Virtual Teams 30
 It's a Matter of Trust31
 Attention to Social Needs 34
 Conclusion35

Chapter 2: Focusing on the Right Work 37

The Big Ideas. 38
 Conclusion 42

Chapter 3: Organizing Virtual Connections 43

The Imprecision of Virtual Teaming 44
 Implementing Virtual Teaming 48
 Ten Dimensions for Engineering a Strategic e-Connection 51
 Conclusion 80

Chapter 4: Strategizing for e-Collaboration 81

The Big Picture. 82
 Seven Strategies for Thoughtful Threaded Conversations. 86
 Conclusion..... 98

Chapter 5: Enhancing Learning With e-Acceleration... 99

Openness: A Philosophical Transformation..... 100
 From Convenience to Creativity103
 Is Openness Enough?107
 Conclusion111

**Chapter 6: Improving School-Based Teams With
 Virtual Teams 113**

Powerful Team Structure115
 Teams, Not Groups116
 The Right Work in Virtual Teams 118

Focus on Learning.....	124
Time for Collaboration	125
Conclusion	126
Chapter 7: Virtual Teaming: A Case Scenario	127
Springfield High School.....	128
Benefits of Technology for School-Based Teams.....	133
Conclusion	135
Chapter 8: Leading School-Based and Virtual Teams	137
Disperse Leadership	138
Establish Clarity Regarding What Needs to Be Done and Why	140
Monitor and Support Teams to Promote Success.....	144
Ensure Reciprocal Accountability	145
Focus on Limited Goals and Initiatives	147
Acknowledge and Celebrate Small Wins	149
Conclusion	152
Chapter 9: Reaching the Tipping Point.....	153
The Moral of the Story	154
Changing the Traditional Culture	156
Reaching the Tipping Point	157
A Final Word	160
Appendix: Reproducibles.....	163
References and Resources	185
Index	197



CHAPTER 1

Examining the Past to Understand the Present

Nothing is stronger than an idea whose time has come. For nearly 150 years, this paraphrase of Victor Hugo's writing has reminded us of the power of compelling ideas. Imagine, however, if two forceful ideas whose time has come merged in a synergistic way to create the potential for a combined impact that is greater than the sum of both ideas. We have arrived at that fortunate convergence in education with growing evidence of the power of PLC at Work and the use of technology as a catalyst for organizational improvement and individual and collective learning.

Technology can enhance the PLC process both within school walls and beyond. Educators now have the capacity to create powerful *virtual collaboration* that can exponentially expand their access to expertise beyond their team, school, or district. Membership in the collaborative teams that drive the PLC process need no longer be restricted to educators assigned to the same building. Easy access to technology does not, however, guarantee that the technology is used productively. Virtual collaboration may never realize its full potential to impact professional practice unless those who engage in that collaboration embrace the key tenets of the PLC process. Conversely, the PLC process is unnecessarily limited without the benefits that technology can provide.

A Quick Definition

We will go into much greater detail about the characteristics of PLCs and virtual collaboration later in the book, but we feel a quick explanation is warranted here. What is a *PLC*? When schools or districts operate as PLCs, educators engage in an ongoing process of working collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. Note that the larger organization—the school or district—represents the PLC. *Collaborative teams* of educators are the fundamental building blocks of the PLC structure and the engine that drives the PLC process.

Virtual collaboration is designed to help educators use technology to extend, enrich, and ultimately improve on the existing PLC process. When done well, virtual collaboration applies the power of technology to:

- Improve communication
- Enrich collegial relationships
- Extend opportunities for innovation
- Expand access to professional expertise
- Promote best practices in supporting student learning
- Accelerate the learning of individual educators and collaborative teams

Which teachers could benefit from virtual collaboration? We offer the following partial list.

- A singleton teacher who represents the only person in the building who teaches a particular subject, course, or grade level
- Small teams of teachers looking to expand the number of members contributing to the work of their teams

- Teachers who believe teaching, like all professions, requires a constant search for best practices
- Teachers who have a burning passion for their subjects and want to deepen their knowledge with other like-minded colleagues
- Teachers willing to share their knowledge, skills, and strengths with others in order to increase their impact on students' lives
- Teachers willing to model the commitment to lifelong learning they hope to instill in their students by engaging in an ongoing study of the art and science of their craft
- Teachers confronting challenges they have been unable to resolve
- Teachers who believe that the craft knowledge and experience of practitioners represent a powerful resource in improving instruction and solving problems
- Teachers who recognize the benefits of expanding their access to practitioner expertise beyond their team, building, or district
- Teachers who would like to contribute to addressing and overcoming the challenges of the profession
- Teachers who, like Henry Adams (2008)—historian, journalist, novelist, and educator—recognize that “a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops” and, thus, hope to expand their influence beyond the students in their classrooms

In short, we contend that *all* teachers could benefit from virtual collaboration. Those who cannot benefit from collaboration should benefit from a change of career.