

Kid ^{BY} Kid, Skill ^{BY} Skill

*Teaching in a Professional
Learning Community at Work™*



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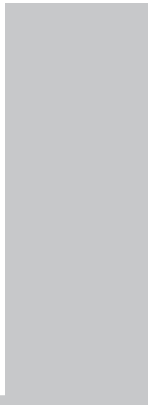
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Chapter 1

Looking Inside a Professional Learning Community

There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision of the future, widely shared.

—Burt Nanus

The professional learning community (PLC) concept is based on the overarching assumption that the purpose of public schools is to ensure that all students learn at high levels. The big learning is the work layered under the four critical questions and how to operationalize the work in classrooms, teams, schools, and the district:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they've learned it?
3. What will we do if they haven't learned it?
4. What will we do if they've demonstrated proficiency?

The commitment to ensuring that students learn rather than merely being taught has huge ramifications for all stakeholders—especially teachers. As Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many (2010) observe:

Every educator—every teacher, counselor, principal, central office staff member, and superintendent—will be called upon to redefine his or her role and responsibilities. People comfortable working in isolation will be asked to work collaboratively. People accustomed to hoarding authority will be asked to share

it. People who have operated under certain assumptions their entire careers will be asked to change them. (p. 248)

These changes manifest themselves in multiple ways, both structurally and culturally, but most significantly in the expectation that administrators and teachers are mutually accountable for enhancing student learning and that they must provide mutual support to each other in doing so.

A Simultaneous Loose-Tight Framework

Teachers who teach in a PLC are part of a school (and hopefully a district) culture of mutual accountability that is simultaneously loose and tight. When Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (1982) studied some of America's best-run companies in order to determine what practices they had in common, they discovered these companies reflected a culture that was both loose (encouraging experimentation, autonomy, creativity) and tight (non-negotiable in such areas as the mission, vision, and core values). They observe:

Having a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight is in essence the co-existence of firm central direction and maximum individual autonomy. Organizations that live by the loose-tight principle are on the one hand rigidly controlled, yet at the same time allow (indeed insist on) autonomy, entrepreneurship, and innovation from the rank and file. (p. 318)

The efficacy of a culture that is both loose and tight has also been documented in research related to effective school districts. For example, Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano (2006) refer to the concept as “defined autonomy” (p. 8). Other writers, such as Eaker and Keating (2012), refer to such a culture as “simultaneous top down and bottom up” (p. 15). Whatever the term, the implications for teachers cannot be overemphasized. Successful teachers who work collaboratively in a PLC are constantly experimenting, trying out new approaches, and making decisions, but all within a clearly defined framework of a collaboratively developed mission, vision, and clearly articulated shared commitments. Teachers who resent any top-down direction and seek to work in a school with few, if any, boundaries will struggle in a school that functions as a professional learning community.

Mutual Accountability and Support

Balancing this culture of tightness in which there are clear expectations about the framework within which everyone works is a culture of support. This support is reflected in many ways, most notably being the support from fellow team members. Teachers aren't asked to go it alone; additional support is provided culturally. This culture of mutual support is reflected in the concept of reciprocal accountability—direction from the top will be accompanied by a corresponding level of support. PLC leaders recognize they have an obligation to provide staff with the resources,

training, mentoring, and support to help them successfully accomplish what they have been asked to do. Richard Elmore (2006) defines the obligation this way: “For every increment of performance I demand of you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation” (p. 93).

The mutual accountability and support culture is reflected every day as teachers work together to enhance the success of their school, each other, and their students. Teachers in PLCs are supportive of each other. The concepts of interdependence, common goals, and mutual accountability drive collaborative teamwork.

The foundation of an accountability culture that is both loose and tight is a clearly articulated mission—the core purpose that drives everything that happens, every day. DuFour et al. (2008) point out:

Clarity of purpose and a willingness to accept responsibility for achieving that purpose are critical to school improvement. Unfortunately, however, many educators interpreted our advocacy for shared mission as a call to write a new mission statement. . . . There is an enormous difference between writing a mission statement and living a mission. (p. 114)

Being a teacher in a school that functions as a true professional learning community means *living* a school’s mission of ensuring high levels of student learning for all students.

It is impossible for teachers to be accountable for embedding a mission of ensuring student learning in their work without being clear on what such work would look like. If a school successfully embeds its written mission statement into its day-to-day practices, what would it look like? Janel helped administrators, faculty, and staff in her district clarify this question by asking them to collaboratively specify what would take place in the district if they really meant it when they said they wanted all students to learn at high levels: What would people see us doing? DuFour et al. (2008) propose the following eleven actions that someone would routinely see in a school that really means it when it advocates a learning mission.

Being a teacher in a school that functions as a true professional learning community means living a school’s mission of ensuring high levels of student learning for all students.

1. *Every teacher is engaged in a process to clarify what each student is to learn in each grade level, each course, and each unit of instruction.*
2. *Every teacher is engaged in a process to clarify consistent criteria by which to assess the quality of student work.*
3. *Every teacher is engaged in a process to assess student learning on a timely and frequent basis through the use of teacher-developed common formative assessments.*
4. *Every school has a specific plan to ensure that students who experience initial difficulty in learning are provided with*

additional time and support for learning during the school day in a timely and directive way that does not cause the student to miss any new direct instruction.

5. *Every school has a specific plan to enrich and extend the learning of students who are not challenged by the required curriculum.*
6. *All professionals are organized into collaborative teams and are given the time and structure during their regular workday to collaborate with colleagues on specific issues that directly impact student learning.*
7. *Every collaborative team of teachers is called upon to work interdependently to achieve a common SMART goal for which members of the team are mutually accountable.*
8. *Every teacher receives frequent and timely information regarding the success of his or her students in learning the essential curriculum and then uses that information to identify strengths and weaknesses as part of a process of continuous improvement.*
9. *Building shared knowledge of best practice is part of the process of shared decision making at both the school and team level.*
10. *Every practice and procedure in place in the school has been examined to assess its impact on learning.*
11. *School leaders are held accountable for ensuring all of the above happen. (pp. 116–117)*

A PLC depends on a faculty composed of teachers who embrace (through their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior) the parameters reflected in the characteristics listed previously. It's not enough that a teacher is willing to teach in a school that lives a learning mission; he or she must be excited about getting to teach in a school that is tight about a passionate and persistent focus on improving the learning of every student.

Collective Commitments

A culture of mutual accountability means much more than pursuing the promise of a school's mission and vision. Teachers in a PLC enthusiastically engage in processes with their colleagues that lead to specific shared commitments and values for both the team and the school. Importantly, teachers engage in this process with fidelity—absolutely believing that developing shared commitments is important and can have a significant impact on student success. John Kotter notes that the central challenge of changing culture is “changing people's behavior” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). Engaging in a collaborative process to develop collective commitments is one of the most powerful activities for shaping values that can ultimately transform the culture of a school or district.