

GAME PLAN

A Playbook for Developing Winning PLCs at Work™

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Preface

Game planning has always been associated with sports, yet today the phrase has become ubiquitous with being well prepared and having a strategic plan for success. In every level of athletic competition, highly effective coaches synthesize their philosophy and expectations into a game plan. In essence, they solidify the most critical components into something tangible and easy to follow. Just as with any sports team, a winning season for schools also starts with the development of a game plan and a playbook.

Many leaders ponder the question of what holds teams back, and, as a Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at Work™ consultant who speaks across the country and has been a part of nationally recognized schools, Héctor García has found an interesting pattern. The schools that struggle to move forward are unable to translate their enthusiasm into a systematic plan of action with a process for monitoring their progress along the journey, and they quickly become distracted by a new initiative or concept. Schools that consistently make progress are not only enthusiastic about the work but are also methodical about developing a game plan, ensuring that it is deeply embedded in the culture and behaviors of the staff, and guaranteeing that everyone has the necessary guidance to implement the new vision.

The concept of winning is pervasive and highly celebrated both in sports and in a PLC culture. To further illustrate our position, we provide the following brief examples of how the characteristics and actions of successful sports teams are similarly aligned to those of PLCs.

- In sports, like in education, individuals can operate in quasi-isolation pursuing different goals, or they can work interdependently and focus on a compelling task or vision. The teams that are purposeful and deliberate about establishing and executing a plan of action seem to win much more often than those who believe in stumbling upon success.
- Focusing on developing and coaching all players results in higher achievements than investing only in star players or waiting until the top recruits come to campus all at once.
- While individual superstars on a team have tried many times to win championships, few success stories come to mind. Yet, there is a litany

Introduction

How Leadership Teams Develop a Winning Game Plan

Evolving education policies and standards across the United States have placed higher accountability and pressure on schools. Strong leadership is needed to navigate, advocate, and implement change in the profession. In past years, school leaders were easily identified as the principal at the building level and the superintendent at the district level. Much in the same manner as we traditionally defined the principal and superintendent as school leaders, we have always thought of leadership teams as those composed solely of administrators. While leadership teams made up exclusively of administrators may still be a viable option, today more and more schools are challenging the traditional notion of leadership teams and are establishing diverse teams in terms of members' perspectives and job responsibilities. Additionally, policy changes are calling for a redesign of the teaching profession. For the purpose of this book, *leader* refers to any individual ranging from the superintendent or principal to various administrators, department chairs, specialists, and teachers leading an essential initiative. Thus, rather than limiting leadership roles to one or two administrators in the entire district, any educator in the school system can be a leader.

This new emerging vision has created an interesting dynamic in schools. Whereas once upon a time staff members could only hope for marginal input and had a low level of responsibility for the outcome of an initiative, today's staff members are an integral part of the implementation plan and the success or failure of any new initiative. Now more than ever, there is a stronger pledge among leaders for full implementation of new initiatives, well-thought-out goals that can withstand the test of time, and a deep commitment to collaborating with multiple stakeholders. In order to obtain progress within initiatives, goals cannot just be transferred to greater task lists and disjointed professional development. They need to translate to simple, measurable statements that can be achieved districtwide. Solutions must

This tool can be used at the beginning of the school year to guide the work of the staff or throughout the year to either continue or adjust the work. Use this tool to spur dialogue between the leadership team and the grade-level or content teams on their progress. Just like in sports, feedback is one of the most important tools for improvement.

Who looks outside, dreams: who looks inside, awakes.

—C.G. Jung

Focus on Learning	1	2	3	4	Notes
1. Learning targets have been clearly established by unit at every grade level or course.					
2. Common assessment criteria have been established at every grade level or course.					
3. An academic support system exists at every grade level or department.					
4. A common strategy or philosophy exists for enriching the learning of students.					
Focus on Collaboration	1	2	3	4	Notes
1. The work schedule ensures time for teams to meet.					
2. All staff members belong to a team.					
3. Teams are productive and effective.					
4. Student data are at the core of what teams use to guide their discussions.					
Focus on Results	1	2	3	4	Notes
1. Student-oriented goals are established by every team.					
2. Formative assessments are used regularly and effectively.					
3. Common assessments are widely used.					
4. Teams regularly assess or reflect on their overall effectiveness.					



Figure 1.2: Team status check.

Norms for Championship Teams

As a group, discuss and document each of the following steps.

Step 1: List the key characteristics or attributes of one of the following teams and identify what makes its meetings so effective.

- A championship coaching staff
- A group of Fortune 500 executives
- A top surgical team
 - *They are clear and supportive of the task at hand.*
 - *They understand that developing a solution in a short amount of time will necessitate active participation and focus by all the team members.*
 - *A differing opinion or perspective is expected, but once the final decision or course of action is established everyone is supportive.*
 - *Every comment is leading toward a solution rather than reinforcing the problem (for example, they don't focus on all the things that can't be done).*
 - *Sometimes all they have is a few minutes, so time is not wasted during these meetings.*
 - *They are committed to a goal that is much larger than their individual goal.*

Step 2: List four or five of the characteristics identified in step 1, framed as norms or "We will . . ." statements, that will help *your* team be highly effective.

- *We will focus our conversations on student learning.*
- *We will ensure that all perspectives are valued and respected.*
- *We will respect each other's time by staying focused and actively engaged on the task at hand.*
- *We will avoid focusing on those things that we can't control and instead spend our time on the things that we can control.*

Step 3: What word or image captures your team's efforts or focus for the year?

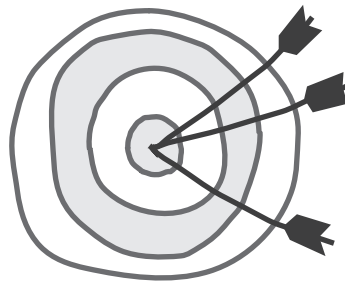


Figure 2.4: Focusing on what is critical.

The ideal conflict point is something leaders need to cultivate in their teams. Staff often shy away from healthy conflict, and therefore leaders need to help teams address any looming issues to, as Patrick Lencioni (2012) puts it, “avoid the destructive hallway conversations that inevitably result when people are reluctant to engage in direct, productive debate” (p. 45). Lencioni refers to this as “mining for conflict,” and this coaching point can help you raise healthy conflict during team meetings and address destructive conflict before it becomes unmanageable.

The What

Asking strategic questions will help any leader look for and expose potential conflict that a team needs to explore in order to develop deep agreement and ownership. This coaching point provides sets of prompts designed for specific group dynamic situations that may arise in a collaborative team. The purpose behind these prompts is to ensure a team has hit the ideal conflict point to allow the group to move toward becoming a cohesive team. It is important to remember that *trust* is the key ingredient to consider in this coaching point.

The How

As a leader, critically reflect on the level of conflict in your team and where it falls on the conflict continuum. Based on your assessment, mine for healthy conflict by challenging your team with these prompts.

When a team is in artificial harmony, ask or discuss the following.

- Can anyone tell the group why this might not be the best approach?
- I would like to give the group the next few minutes to speak honestly about the topic we just covered. Please share your thoughts with the team.
- I would like to have a healthy debate on this topic. Is anyone willing to start us out with their ideas?
- I have a problem with this idea. Is there anyone else struggling to understand the rationale here?
- I would like to encourage [remind] everyone to speak up when you disagree with any opinion or decision of the group. Please do this by suggesting alternative viewpoints or ideas, not by making personal attacks on a member’s idea or suggestion.
- Could our team use a group norm that encourages us to speak honestly and have equity of voice?
- I would like to encourage you to not leave our meeting and have private conversations with a select few. Instead, please bring forth any concerns you